

A/N: I have begun the process of editing this story. For new readers, this hopefully means that your experience with this story will be the best possible. For re-readers, this means a few new surprises, but there will be few changes to the fabric of the story.

Enjoy the story!

Disclaimer: The characters in this story that you do not recognize belong to me. Everything else belongs to JK Rowling. The only profit I earn from the making of this story is experience.

Gabriel

Laura looked up at the big house with a vague sense of unease. She'd been in this business for three years now, and this was the first time she'd been sent to a place that screamed 'refined wealth' as loudly as this one did. It wasn't ostentatious – in some ways she would feel a lot better if it were – no, it was tasteful and deceptively simple. A custom design, blending modern lines with gothic details.

A far cry from the trailer parks she usually visited.

She looked over her shoulder, stalling for time before she summoned enough courage to ring the doorbell. A perfectly kept lawn spread out in front of the house. Beyond it was a stretch of pine trees, shielding the house from the road. The long private drive curved into the trees, making the house seem completely isolated.

A shiver ran up Laura's spine, and she turned back to the door. Steeling her courage, she rang the doorbell and waited. Within the space of a few heart beats, the door opened to reveal a well-dressed young woman. Laura estimated that she was in her early twenties. She wore pressed slacks and a white blouse, and her brown hair was swept into an elegant bun. In the back of her mind, Laura felt a bit disappointed – for some reason she'd had the vague notion that some sort of fairy princess would open the door.

"Hello, I'm Laura Cervantes," she introduced, pasting on a bright smile as she stuck out her hand.

The woman smiled back and shook her hand, though she made no move to invite Laura in. "Can I help you?" The words were stilted and enunciated, with the quality of a memorized passage to them, bizarrely enough.

"Er, yes. I was sent here by Social Services..."

The brunette seemed to take a moment to think through the statement, then nodded and smiled, stepping back to allow Laura through the doorway. "Please come in."

Laura stepped in, and heard the door click shut behind her. She barely noticed as the brunette walked forward. The inside of the house was even more spectacular than the outside. The roof of the entrance hall was high and vaulted, easily 12 feet tall. Sunlight flooded the house through skylights and full length windows. Warm golden wood and clean white accents gave an air of hospitality and space.

"Your shoes, please." Laura turned to the smiling brunette, startled out of her inspection.

"Oh, er, right." She slipped out of her pumps and put them in the corner where the woman indicated. For the first time she noticed that the woman wore no shoes either. Laura was quickly becoming bemused by the situation. It was really a far cry from her usual cases, and a far cry from any situation she'd been in before.

The woman – Laura was beginning to suspect that she was a servant of some sort – led her into a sitting room and gestured for her to take a seat on one of the impressive white leather couches. Laura obliged, though she felt slightly awkward about doing so.

"Tea? Coffee?" Laura wondered if the woman was fluent in English.

"Tea would be lovely, thank you." As the woman bustled off, Laura turned her attention to inspecting the room and mentally reviewing the case file.

It was an odd case. Three months ago the woman who owned this house – Ms Sarai A. mal Théa – had adopted a little boy under strange circumstances. Ms mal Théa had come across a large man beating a boy, and had informed the man that if he touched the child

again she would retaliate. She had then called the boy to her, and he had gone willingly. The man had – in front of witnesses – foresworn the child and left, returning to England before anyone had the chance to protest.

Over the next month, mal Théa had taken the boy into her home and filed for adoption. The courts had granted it with the stipulation that a Social Worker be allowed to inspect the living situation at any time. The woman had agreed readily and had taken the boy.

Someone was supposed to have checked up on the new family weeks ago, but cases had piled up that were deemed far more pressing than this one. Laura had been the first person with the time, so her superiors had handed her the file and sent her out the door.

She looked around the room again and began noting signs of imperfection with a slight sense of relief. The coffee table had a slight chip on one edge. There was a child's hand print on one of the windows that you could see when the sun hit just right. One of the pictures above the mantle was crooked.

Attention captured by the pictures, Laura stood and walked over to look at them more closely. One was obviously a family portrait, taken recently, as the boy was in the picture. Harry? She thought that was his name, but she also remembered something about a name change, so she wasn't certain. The file had been disgustingly short of information.

There were three people in the picture; a woman and two children. The woman must be Sarai mal Théa, Laura noted with interest. She was small, around the same size as the older child, with black eyes carefully lined in kohl. She had dark skin and spiky white hair. The woman was wearing a dark sari, which surprised Laura. She wouldn't have guessed that the woman was Indian from the file.

On the woman's left stood a beautiful young girl, 12 or 13, Laura guessed. She had long curling black hair and amber eyes. Her resemblance to Sarai left no doubt that this was the daughter, Naomi. She was neatly dressed in a pink blazer and appeared completely uninterested in the camera.

The third figure was the little boy Laura had been sent to check on. He stared out at the camera with the arresting green eyes. His hair

was as black as the girl's and had been carefully slicked back. His skin was remarkably pale against the soft brown complexions of the women in the picture. A livid scar ran diagonally across his face from his forehead, down across the bridge of his nose, and disappearing under his jaw. There was a place on his forehead that looked like someone had splattered acid on it, and Laura felt her heart go out to him. He was dressed in a suit, and sat contentedly on the woman's lap, holding one of her hands. He looked around 4, but Laura knew from her files that he had recently turned 6.

After another moment she tore her gaze away in order to look at the other pictures. The most striking thing they had in common, Laura noted with interest, was that they were all annoyingly attractive. Weren't there any ugly people in this family? Maybe they just didn't display those family members on the mantel, she thought, vaguely amused by the preposterous idea.

The first portrait was of an Indian man – obviously related to Sarai – together with a petite blonde woman, an infant, a teenage boy, and a young girl. Like the older woman, the girl was obviously not a blood relative. Maybe she was a cousin or another adoptee? She was too young to be the boy's serious girlfriend, which was the only other reason Laura could think of for her to be present in the family portrait.

A second portrait was of a woman who appeared to be another relative of Sarai. She stood beside a distinguished looking gentleman with pale skin and short salt and pepper hair. They were both wearing what looked like academic robes, though Laura's recollection of her own college graduation was too vague to be sure. There were two young adults standing with them, a boy and a girl, the girl heavily pregnant. Laura was fairly confident that these two were boyfriend and girlfriend, and she noted with pleasure that the family seemed to accept the girlfriend into their family despite their son's apparent indiscretion. The older gentleman had a toddler perched on his knee, a little boy who Laura guessed was a surprise addition to the family.

There were more pictures hanging above the mantle, but a polite cough caught her attention, and she turned toward the newcomer with a little smile. The brunette smiled back at her, carrying in the tea service.

"I like that picture," came a quiet voice near the entryway. Laura looked toward the other door in surprise as the girl from the first picture stepped into the room and nodded slightly toward the family portrait. "It was taken two weeks ago for Gabriel's birthday."

"Ah," Laura said blankly. The girl looked over at her, amber eyes taking her in and dismissing her. The woman felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. "Um, I'm Laura Cervantes, I'm the case worker assigned-"

"To my brother. Yes. Rosie told me." The girl walked further into the room and settled gracefully into the white armchair. She accepted a cup of tea from the brunette – Rosie – without looking away from Laura. "Please sit," she said, voice cold. Laura complied, accepting a cup of tea with a murmured 'thank you.' The girl said something to the brunette in another language – French, Laura guessed – and the woman replied brightly, then left. The girl turned back to Laura.

"I am Naomi mal Théa. I apologize that my mother and Gabriel are not here at present, but they did not know you were coming." Was that a hint of disapproval? If it was, it was gone quickly, replaced by an emotionless chill that left Laura on edge. "Rosie is calling mother now and they should arrive soon. Until then, is there any part of this... inspection, that I can take care of?"

Laura forced herself to swallow her tea and set down the cup before she spilled. She could deal with raging drunks, trailer trash, and lying criminals – she could work with one creepy little girl.

"It's nice to meet you, Naomi," Laura began, forcing herself to meet the cold brown eyes. "Yes, in fact, there are some things that can be done while we're waiting." She opened her briefcase and pulled out a pen and the pertinent file. "Can you maybe show me around? Especially your... new brother's room?"

"No."

Laura blinked, staring at the girl, eyebrow raised. "Excuse me?"

"We have several simple rules in this house, and one is that private areas are just that. Private. Not even mother will enter Gabriel's room without his permission."

"Oh." Laura frowned thoughtfully, then nodded as she jotted it down in her notes. It was an interesting rule to have. "Well, can you tell me any other family rules?"

Naomi stared at her for a moment, then gave a tiny nod of approval. "We eat meals as a family. We are responsible for picking up after ourselves, and keeping our private areas clean. Rosie is not allowed to clean our rooms." The girl paused as Laura wrote that down. She definitely approved of the children needing to pick up after themselves.

"Lying is not tolerated in this house, nor is shirking duties. Both are punishable offenses." Laura frowned slightly and opened her mouth to ask what sort of punishment, but Naomi beat her to it. "My punishments usually include house arrest without privileges. So far we have not had to think up an alternative for Gabriel." A slight smile flickered on the girl's face, the first real sign of emotion Laura had seen. "He's a good boy," Naomi said fondly.

"Does your mother ever hit you or your brother?" Laura asked, matter of factly.

The girl didn't look scandalized. "No," she said.

"Physically punish you in any way?" Laura pressed. She didn't think it was the case, but she had to ask.

"The only crime worth a slap from Mother," the girl told her calmly, "is a slap to another family member. Were I to hit Gabriel, she would likely slap me."

Laura nodded and wrote that down. Life as this girl described it seemed oddly ideal. Every child's dream, really. A beautiful house, fair rules, plenty of money...

"Do you love your mother?"

"Yes." And despite the closed expression and all-around creepiness of the girl, Laura couldn't help but believe her.

"What about your father?" That was one point that was bugging Laura. Nowhere was there a mention of a Mr. mal Théa, and in the conversation with this girl she continually mentioned her mother, but

nothing about her father. There was nothing in the paperwork about Sarai being a single mother.

"I have never met him," the girl said coolly, looking out the window. Laura shivered as she imagined the temperature lowering a few degrees.

"In the paperwork-"

"My uncle signed with my mother," Naomi broke in. "He helps support us financially, and is the only father figure I – or Gabriel – will ever need."

Laura wrote that down too.

Nearly forty five minutes after entering the mal Théa home, the object of her inquiry finally arrived. Laura was depressingly grateful. Naomi was one of the most polite children she'd ever met, but she was also extremely cold, and Laura couldn't be happier for a break in company.

The sound of the door opening in the entryway attracted both her attention and Naomi's. They rose to their feet as an elegant woman came into the sitting room, draped in a dark blue sari. Her eyes were even more remarkable in real life than they had been in the picture. She stared silently at Laura for a moment before she fully entered the room.

"Ms Cervantes?" The woman had a distinctly French lilt to her voice, a far cry from the Indian accent Laura had come to expect.

"Just Laura is fine," Laura smiled brightly and held out her hand. The tiny woman – she couldn't be more than 5'3" – shook it, running her eyes over Laura in much the same way her daughter had an hour earlier. She turned away to greet her daughter with a kiss on each cheek, and Laura was once again struck by the strong familial resemblance.

The mal Théas had a brief conversation in French, then Naomi nodded deeply to her mother and left without another word. Sarai turned back to Laura.

"Laura. My daughter says that you two talked for some time already. What more can I do for you?"

"Well, Ms mal Théa," Laura began.

"Sarai," the woman interrupted with a quirked eyebrow. "We are all friends here." The tone was somewhat arrogant, with a strong trace of underlying amusement. Laura has relieved to note that she wasn't as emotionless as her daughter seemed to be, though the casual arrogance was likely to become annoying very quickly.

"Sarai, then," Laura nodded. "I was hoping you could show me around? I can't stay much longer, but I'd like to talk to Gabriel and see the house."

Sarai nodded, then led Laura on a whirl-wind tour. The house either wasn't as big as she'd thought it was, or quite a bit had been left out of the tour.

The bedrooms upstairs were last.

"That is my room," Sarai nodded toward the first closed door. "Naomi's room," was the second. "This is Reuben's bedroom."

Laura blinked. Reuben? Was there another member of the family that no one had mentioned? But Sarai was knocking on the door. A soft "come in," led to the opening of the door.

The room was mid-sized, around the size of the bedroom Laura shared with her husband, actually. It was darker than the other rooms she'd been shown, a rich dark green substituted for white, and the wood was a bit darker. It reminded Laura of a cool forest cave.

There were several shelves lined with books and an open wooden chest revealed a small army of stuffed animals. Toy soldiers were carefully arranged on the floor between the little boy, Gabriel, and Naomi. They had apparently been continuing a game where they had left off, though they didn't appear at all surprised to see the two adults.

"Hello," Gabriel said softly, looking up at Laura with emotive green eyes. The scars on his face stood out boldly against the pale skin,

and Laura felt her heart squeeze in sympathetic pain. Whatever had caused those must've been horrible.

"Hello," she smiled, kneeling down so head was on the same level as his. "I'm Laura."

"I'm Gabriel," he replied politely, though he didn't reach out to shake her offered hand. She withdrew it, not offended.

"How are you, Gabriel?"

"Very well, thank you."

"Do you think we could talk, just you and me?" The boy's eyes flicked to his mother, then to his sister. Slowly – almost reluctantly – he nodded. The other women tactfully withdrew, though Sarai pointedly left the door open. "So," Laura smiled as she settled down.

The boy remained silent, watching her warily. Without his new family in the room, he seemed to shrink down – and he hadn't been a large boy to begin with.

"So, how do you like it here?"

"It's wonderful," Gabriel said softly, black hair falling into his eyes.

So much for getting him to start talking on his own. "Gabriel. That's a very pretty name."

"Thank you," the comment won a smile out of the little boy. "Mama let me choose it myself. She told me that it's the name of one of the angels of the Christian God, and that it means strong man of god."

"Your mother called you Reuben, out in the hall. Why is that, Gabriel?"

If her previous comment had made the boy smile, this comment made him glow. "It's part of my middle name," he told her with a sweet smile. "Mama chose it. It means 'behold, a son.'"

It was a good choice, Laura noted. If there was one thing she knew about kids who had suffered abuse, it was that they thrived on loving attention and affirmation. With a name like that, every time his new

'mama' called him Reuben, she affirmed that he was her son. Laura approved.

"Part of your middle name?" she inquired.

"My name is Gabriel Reuben-Amrit mal Théa," he said, his chin lifting in an imitation of the arrogance displayed by his mother and sister. Laura grinned.

"What does Amrit mean?" She was tickled that this little boy knew what his names meant. It showed a lot of thought went into this, and that he had been part of it. After all, hadn't he just told her that he had chosen the name Gabriel?

"It means immortal," he said with a smile. "Ami named me that. She said I needed a proper Indian name, too."

Ami being his sister? For some reason Laura had trouble seeing the cold girl she had spoken with allowing nicknames. But then, she noted, when she'd entered the room the girl had been playing soldiers with her new little brother, so there was probably a lot that she wasn't seeing.

"What do you think of your new sister?" Laura asked curiously. It was apparently a good topic of conversation, because the boy grinned widely and bounced slightly.

"She's awesome! She's really nice, and kind, and helpful, and absolutely perfect! She plays with me all the time." Laura tried but failed to transpose this description onto the girl that she had just met. Gabriel was still talking. "I always used to want a sister just like her, and now I have one!"

"Not a brother?" Most little boys would rather have brothers. Gabriel's face closed and he shook his head sharply. From one breath to the next he went from an excited six year old to the strange, ethereal child she had seen in the picture, old beyond his years.

Time for a change in topic.

"What do you think about your new mama?" She asked instead.

The rest of the interview was subdued. The smiles she won were fleeting, and none of them reached his eyes. He spoke fondly of his new mother, and seemed just as enamored with her as he had been of Naomi – he was merely far more subdued in expressing it.

As Laura said her goodbyes and promised to visit again in a few months – this time not a surprise visit – she wondered again about the odd dynamics of the little family. In her car, pulling away from the dream house, she began reviewing everything under a microscope.

The daughter was closed, cold, and gave Laura the heebie jeebies. And yet, when Gabriel talked about her, it was like he was talking about someone entirely different. Why was that? And, more importantly, what had made Naomi into the girl that had spoken to Laura over tea? Would that same emotional suicide take place in Gabriel, given enough time?

Or had it already happened? Laura thought over the interview with the little boy. No, she decided. His oddness was easily attributed to being a recent victim of abuse. Three months was hardly enough to cure him and return him to a healthy state of mind for a little boy his age.

What about the mother? Sarai had impressed Laura. Back on the interstate, Laura decided not to worry. There was nothing inherently bad about the situation, and everything pointed toward it being a perfectly healthy – even ideal – environment to raise children. If she decided things weren't working out the next time she visited, then she would do something about it. Until then, she had more pressing cases to worry about.

A/N: Laura Cervantes is a Muggle with no knowledge of the Wizarding World.

Gabriel is Harry Potter. The lightning bolt scar is marred by the acid burn and the larger scar across his face. It's there, but even under close examination a person would be hard pressed to find it without knowing what they're looking for.

Sarai and her family live in the mountains of the Pacific Northwest, though that isn't specifically where she "obtained" Harry. More on those circumstances later.

On the pictures: The first family portrait was Sarai, Naomi, and Harry. The second was Sarai's older brother Akshay and his family; his wife Genevieve, their infant daughter Fayette, their son Didier, and his wife Amarante. The last picture is of Sarai's older sister Miriam Defayne, her husband Claudius, and their son Renaud, his wife Aurelie, their son Levi, and their unborn son Rance. If you don't get it now, that's okay – they will get an actual introduction later in the story.

A/N: Akshay, called Shay, is Sarai's older brother. Laura saw his picture on the mantle last chapter.

Sarai is also called Rai.

"(Conversation in parentheses indicates French being spoken.)"

Two weeks after Harry's rescue

(Three months before the Prologue)

Shay stared at the little boy, unblinking and uncomprehending. Beneath his gaze the child trembled, but some eldritch fire burned in the boy's eyes, and he stared back with an unnerving green gaze. Eyes shouldn't be so green. It was unnatural. Trying to dismiss the unease they caused him, Shay decided to just get on with things.

"(What's your name, boy?)"

The boy stared back, his mouth slightly open. Shay's cheek ticked. Where had Rai found this... boy? Not in France, he realized with irritation. The child probably couldn't understand the tongue. It was with a sneer that he repeated the question in English.

"What are you called, boy."

The boy responded to the sneer by appearing to shrink into himself. Already tiny, it was disconcerting to find he could make himself even smaller. But he continued to focus his unnatural gaze at Shay – though fear now warred with the fire. This time the boy understood.

"Freak, sir."

"That's not a name," he snapped.

Finally the gaze dropped, and the scrawny shoulders hunched. Skinny arms wrapped around an equally skinny torso.

"Sorry, sir," he whispered.

Shay's cheek ticked again. "Well, what do your parents call you?"

The boy shifted, then big green eyes peeked out from beneath long black bangs. A spark of defiance crept into the boy's eyes.

"My parents call me nothing, sir. They're dead."

Harry stared up at the dark man through his curtain of hair. The man was angry, but he wasn't screaming or hurting the Freak. Why wasn't he hurting the Freak if he was angry? (Because the Freak was always the reason why people were angry. The big man always said it was his fault.)

That's what gave him the courage to look back at the dark man and indicate that it was Harry who knew what he was talking about. The dark man wanted to know what they called him – well, as the Freak was the one who was always being yelled at, he imagined that he knew best what they called him.

Immediately after his spark of defiance, he looked away again. That was stupid. There was no point inviting the slaps. They would come in time, and no matter how much he deserved them, Harry would rather avoid them as long as possible. He knew he was being selfish and very bad for even daring to think the slaps weren't deserved. But he couldn't help it.

He stared at the floor in front of his feet, waiting. It was only a matter of time.

Shay was officially confused. First defiance, then complete submission. A counter-intuitive stance that Shay identified immediately as someone who expected to be hit and had been hit enough to know how to make it less painful. But this was just a child... Even Shay would never harm a child like this.

"Boy." A flicker of green. "Look at me, boy."

The boy raised his eyes hesitantly and stared at him again. Freak, he called himself. Who called a child Freak? A burning disgust roiled angrily in Shay's gut. He would find these people, he swore silently. He would find them and he would prove exactly how he earned the title Butcher.

"I am Akshay mal Théa. My sister wants to claim you as her son."

The boy's head jerked up and Shay watched the wild hope quickly beaten down in that so-expressive gaze. Shay forcefully suppressed the stupid protective urge that sprang up. He would not make this boy his problem. If Rai wanted to invite difficulties, well, she could go ahead and do so.

"I've decided to grant her permission. Do you know what that means, boy?"

The little jaw worked, but no sound came out.

"That means you need a name. I refuse to allow a member of my House to answer to a degrading slur like 'Freak.'" A sneer tugged up his lip, and he jerked his head slightly.

Finally the child found his voice. "The... The pretty lady, sir?" he squeaked, whites showing all around his eyes. "The pretty lady wants me?"

Dark amusement played in Shay's eyes. The pretty lady? Well, he supposed Rai was pretty enough, in her own sort of way.

"Sarai," he clarified. "The woman with the white hair."

Green eyes burned with that unnamable fire. "Sarai," the boy repeated hungrily. "Sarai wants the Freak."

Shay's eye ticked, but he didn't try to correct the child. Rai could worry about that. With an abrupt nod, he spun and stalked out of the tiny hospital room, leaving behind a wide-eyed little boy curled up in the sterile hospital bed.

Someone would pay for that little boy's pain. No one hurt his family and got away unscathed.

Rai watched her brother leave the room in a swirl of dark cloth. His eye was ticking, and she took it as a good sign for her boy.

"(So, is he mine?)" She didn't bother to disguise the ferocity in her voice. She wanted this boy. He needed her, and that spoke to every mothering bone in her body. To tell the truth, it didn't really matter what Shay said - she intended to have her way in the matter.

"(Yes,)" he said shortly, before sweeping out of the room.

"(He's angry,)" said Ami.

Rai looked over at the girl who stood poised beside the medicine cabinet and gave an ironic smile.

"(Aren't we all? At least he gets to do something about it.)"

"(You are doing something, mother.)"

"(I know. I know, Ami.)"

Ami walked over and pressed a cold kiss to one cheek, then the other. Rai smiled warmly at her daughter, then turned to re-enter the room with the little boy. It was time to come up with a name.

Shay took a Portkey back to the family manor, stalking restlessly down to the terrace. He was in a Bad Mood, and the servants knew enough to keep out of his way. Oh, we would never actually harm the help, but he wasn't above snarling at them when he was having a bad day.

For a brief moment he wished that his family employed House Elves – he could take his anger out on such creatures – but the wish passed quickly. It was a mark of status that the mal Théas could afford human servants.

For the moment he simply stood on the terrace, seething. He wanted to wrap his hands around the neck of that cruel, stupid Muggle who had dared harm that little boy. Shay's nephew. My nephew, Shay growled slightly. A Muggle had hurt a mal Théa. For a crime such as that, there was only death.

"(Darling, what's the matter?)"

Shay turned to look at the serene blonde, forcing himself to calm down. He held out a welcoming hand to his wife, and she stepped into the half-circle of his embrace.

"(Rai's little foundling... I gave her permission to make him a mal Théa.)"

"(That's wonderful,)" she smiled, gray eyes amused. "(But it doesn't explain why Camille was too terrified to come tell you that dinner is ready.)"

"(He said his name is Freak, Genevieve)" Shay ground out, looking out across the gardens. "(He was scrawny, psychotic, and he had more scars than many of my veteran fighters.)"

"(The name is probably already changed,)" Genevieve said, arching an eyebrow. "(Being scrawny is easily fixed with nutrient potions, and I dare you to doubt Rai's abilities there. Psychosis seems to be a requirement in this family, so it's actually good if he is, he'll fit right in. And scars are very dashing, don't you think?)" She reached up and touched one of the many scars littering Shay's face, and he let her. "(Besides, there's always concealment charms like you use,)" she said dismissively

"(That isn't the point, Genevieve, and you know it.)" She had succeeded in calming him, though, and he had reverted to the cool, composed pureblood he normally was.

His wife shrugged, making it obvious that she didn't particularly care.

"(I made inquiries about the family the child came from,)" he informed her after a moment. "(The Dursley family. They live in England. My contact still doesn't know their address, but he will let me know as soon as he finds them. They will regret hurting my nephew.)"

"(That's lovely dear. But it's dinner time now, and you wouldn't want Camille's cooking going to waste.)" With a patient indifference born of more than 20 years spent married to a mass murderer, Genevieve steered him back inside the manor, talking calmly of their daughter's latest exploits in learning to walk and of their son's new home in Paris.

Dumbledore stared down at the letter, too shocked to truly react. The Dursleys had sold their house and had moved away without leaving so much as a forwarding address.

Three weeks ago Mrs Figg had written that the Dusleys had won a trip to the States from some kind of Muggle broadcast – he was a bit fuzzy on the details – and that they would be gone for five days. He

had been nervous about Harry being out of the house for so long, but he was fairly certain that the boy would be safe in America for a week.

Now, however, Mrs Figg reported that they had gotten back from their vacation only to turn around and put their house up for sale. The old woman confided that this was very odd behavior, even for Muggles.

She had also admitted that she hadn't seen Harry anywhere, though that wasn't necessarily unusual. The boy was like a ghost, she wrote. You didn't see him unless he wanted to be seen – and even then, he almost had to be jumping up and down waving his arms for you to notice him.

But that wasn't the point. The point was that the Dursleys had gone to an unknown and unprotected address, taking the Boy Who Lived with them.

Dumbledore nearly groaned. He did not want to deal with this right now. There were far too many other things that needed to be taken care of – not least of which was finding this year's Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. Professor Gromin hadn't actually resigned yet, but he expected the letter soon and had already begun the search for a replacement.

But as much as he wanted to push this to the side and worry about it later, he knew he couldn't. Harry was important. Even more important than finding a replacement for a teacher who hadn't quit yet. Dumbledore didn't have the time, but he knew people who did.

Petunia looked up from slicing potatoes when she heard the knock. Wiping her hands on her apron, she opened the front door with a smile, prepared to greet whichever new neighbor had come to wish them well.

She was, therefore, somewhat surprised by the sight of the man on the doorstep. He definitely did not seem to be the type of person to live in a neighborhood like this. He was tall, with brown skin and black eyes. His curly black hair was pulled into a low ponytail (men these days! Really, long hair?) and tied at the nape of his neck. A neatly trimmed goatee framed his unsmiling mouth. He was wearing

what could only be a hand-tailored suit – nothing off the racks would fit the broad shoulders and narrow waist that perfectly.

He was tall, dark, and handsome. Petunia's smile grew a little, and she patted her stringy blonde hair nervously. The man quirked what might've been called a smile.

"Petunia Dursley?"

"That's me," she giggled a little. "Can I help you?"

"My name is Akshay mal Théa. I was hoping to speak with you and your husband. Is he here?"

"He should be home soon," she smiled anxiously, opening the door wider. "Won't you come in?"

"Thank you." He stepped in, and she led him to the new living room.

"I'm sorry about the mess, Mr mal Théa," she fretted, "we just moved, and we haven't finished unpacking yet."

The man simply nodded and went over to stand by the fireplace, casually inspecting the pictures she kept there.

"That's my son Dudley," she said proudly. "He's such a precious little boy! Do you have any children Mr mal Théa?" she inquired, hoping to start some sort of conversation.

"Two," he replied, not looking away from the pictures.

"Oh. What're their names?" She sat down on the couch, wishing he would do the same.

"Didier and Fayette."

Petunia forced a smile, not particularly fond of the names. She felt a little bad for the poor children who would grow up without good, strong English names like her son's. "That's lovely. How old are they?"

"Didier is 19, Fayette just turned 1."

The blonde blinked in surprise at the space between their ages, and again by the revelation that this man was old enough to have a grown son. Petunia hadn't thought he could be much older than her.

"Well, my Dudley is 6," she jumped on the opportunity to talk about her son. "We took him to America for an early birthday present and had a lovely time. Have you ever been to America, Mr mal Théa?" she asked, hoping he'd say no. She loved it that most people she spoke to had never been. It made her feel important.

"Yes," he said dryly. "Many times."

"Oh. Well, we hope to go again," she temporized. She wondered what she should say next. He wasn't nearly as friendly as she'd hoped he would be, and she was beginning to feel very awkward. She rather wished she had told him to go away and come back when Vernon was home.

As if in answer to her wishes, the door opened and her husband's booming voice echoed around the house. "I'm home, Pet!"

"In here, Vernon," she called, eyes darting away from the dark man's suddenly stiff back. "We have company," she added with a simpering smile.

Dursley walked into the room and Shay turned to look at the man who had abused and abandoned little Gabriel. He was monstrously fat, and just as ugly as the boy whose portraits dominated the mantle. Even uglier, if possible.

And he was smiling at Shay in a manner he obviously considered ingratiating. It made Shay feel dirty, and very few things could make the Parisian Butcher feel dirty. His loathing for the Muggle intensified.

Pulling out his wand, he conjured a Muggle pistol in the fat man's jacket pocket and cast Imperio. The Muggle's face slackened, he pulled out the gun, and without a word shot his wife three times in the heart and once in the head.

Smiling pleasantly, Shay walked out the door after removing any memory of him from the man's mind. His work was done. Let the Muggles deal with the consequences. He was downright cheerful as he Portkeyed back to the manor.

A/N: Didier is pronounced "dih dee ay" if you're curious. And Genevieve is pronounced of zhohn vee ev. There're going to be a lot of French names in this story, as the mal Théas are primarily French.

mal Théa is pronounced mal TAY ah.

Dream

Laura looked up at the big house as she climbed out of her car. It didn't seem quite so daunting this time around, and she wondered if that was because she knew what to expect or if her mind was just blowing her first impression out of proportion.

Either way, this evening the house seemed beautiful, refined, and welcoming. She rang the doorbell and waited, shivering slightly in the cold. There was snow on the ground, and she was definitely not dressed to be out in the weather, winter coat notwithstanding.

Rosie opened the door with a welcoming smile and beckoned her in. "Coat?" she offered. "Shoes?"

"Thank you," Laura handed her coat to the woman and slipped her shoes off into the indicated corner. Having expected it this time, she'd taken care to wear thick, warm socks. Not that it was really necessary, she noted. The house was pleasantly warm, and smelled strongly of mulled cider.

She followed Rosie out to the sitting room where Naomi and Gabriel sat reading together in a window seat. Laura smiled warmly at the picturesque scene. The older girl cradled the little boy in her lap, and was coaching him softly, murmuring in his ear. Her little brother looked happy in her arms, and was reading the story in halting French. They were dressed in matching white turtlenecks and they had a dark green blanket coiled around them.

"Hello," Laura greeted, breaking into the scene with a small pang of regret.

They looked up at her, and Gabriel smiled in greeting. He'd grown, Laura noted with pleasure, and had reached a healthy weight for a boy his size, though he was still quite small for his age. His hair was slicked back and he was wearing a little pair of glasses perched on the end of his nose.

"Bonjour," he replied, waving, but making no move to leave the circle of his sister's arms. Naomi nodded slightly in acknowledgement but said nothing.

"Do you remember me, Gabriel?"

"You're Laura," he said seriously, regarding her with curious green eyes. "You're here to make sure I'm happy with Mama and Ami."

"Yes, I am," she smiled broadly, blue eyes crinkling up in the face of the child's guileless statement. "And are you happy?" she asked, lifting her eyebrows and encouraging him to tell the truth.

"Very much, thank you," he replied.

"What're you reading?" she asked, walking further into the room.

"La Belle et la Bête," he replied, excitedly. "J'adore le livre!"

"You're learning French?" she asked, smiling and holding up a forestalling hand. She didn't speak a word of the language, and was impressed that the boy was learning it. Of course, it had sounded as though French and English were spoken interchangeably in this household, so she probably shouldn't be too surprised.

"Mama and Ami and Rosie are teaching me," he said happily. His sister's arms tightened reflexively, then loosened.

"Laura, hello." Laura spun in surprise. She hadn't heard anyone come up behind her! Sarai gave her a knowing smile and walked over to join her children by the window. Like the children, she was dressed in white, though her sari was also patterned with gold. They looked striking together, Laura noted.

"Thank you so much for having me," Laura smiled, recovering quickly. "I've been looking forward to seeing Gabriel again."

Sarai smiled and stroked her son's head. "I don't blame you. Reuben's a good boy." The boy beamed at the praise, leaning into the affectionate touch. "Please, sit down. Dinner will be ready soon."

Laura sat on the couch, and was quickly joined by the others. She made small-talk easily, trying to figure out details of their lives from dropped hints. Everything she heard pointed toward happiness and domestic bliss. Gabriel – or Brie, as his sister was now calling him – had only good things to say about his family.

They had only been talking for fifteen minutes or so when they heard the front door open. Sarai stood gracefully as a very tall man entered the room. Very tall, Laura noted, and very handsome. He entered the room with an easy grace, and the children both hurried to greet him. He swept Gabriel up into his arms, resting the boy on his hip while he used his other arm to envelope Naomi in a hug. He stooped down to kiss the forehead of the much shorter white-haired woman, and they all spoke together in French.

Laura felt very out of place.

The feeling passed quickly, however, as the man let go of the children and followed Sarai further into the sitting room. Laura stood and smiled, hoping she didn't look too awkward. The man assessed her coldly, and suddenly she knew exactly where Naomi had learned to be so emotionless.

"This is Laura Cervantes," Sarai introduced with a cool smile. "She is Gabriel's... social worker." The man looked unimpressed. "Laura, this is my older brother Akshay."

"It's a pleasure," she smiled, sticking out her hand. He took it, but let go quickly. He promptly proceeded to ignore her in favor of speaking to the children in French.

The sudden change in dynamics surprised and intrigued Laura. Around this man, Naomi was downright open. Laura could see hero-worship in the girl's eyes, and she wasn't sure if that ought to worry her. Gabriel seemed to regard the man as something too good to be true, and seemed bent on maintaining physical contact. The man allowed it with good humor, despite his unwelcoming attitude toward Laura.

Apparently Akshay had no intention of staying, as he handed both children small boxes, said something to his sister in a language that Laura didn't recognize, then left. He didn't even nod in her general direction, she noted with faint bemusement.

The children opened their presents with far more decorum than most kids she'd encountered. On the revelation that the gifts were sweets, they both relinquished them to their mother without any words

needing to be spoken, though Laura suspected that might have something to do with her presence.

Soon Rosie called them in to dinner, and Laura was given the rather unique experience of being waited on in a private home. The meal was very good, but then, she'd expected it to be. Dinner conversation was also quite easy, and curious questions were exchanged until it was time for Laura to leave.

It wasn't until later, when she was lying in bed and thinking over the evening, that she realized just how masterfully the conversation had been orchestrated. It had seemed so natural at the time, but now she realized that every time she asked a truly personal question, she had been expertly diverted. Not one of the mal Théas had outright refused to answer a question, but the more she thought about it, the more Laura realized she hadn't found out.

Sarai was a teacher, but Laura didn't know where she taught or what subject. Naomi was 12 and attended boarding school, but like Sarai, hadn't said where. When asked what her favorite subject in school was, she had skillfully turned the conversation toward her plan to become a doctor. Gabriel had been as masterful as the two women, Laura grimaced, though he used a different approach. One look from those big, sorrowful green eyes and any questions were quickly forgotten in an attempt to make him smile.

She'd been duped. Masterfully. And, she thought as she drifted off to sleep, she couldn't quite bring herself to care.

"(I can't understand your preoccupation with those Muggles, Rai. I think I've indulged you a bit too much. I let you go to a Muggle school and have mudblood friends. I let you buy Muggle property and live in a Muggle house. I even let you teach Muggle Studies! All of this and what is my thanks? You invite Muggles in for dinner!)"

Rai watched as her brother drummed his fingers on his desk. His cheek was ticking slightly, and his dark eyes smoldered. When he'd called her to his office, she'd been expecting some sort of rebuke for letting a Muggle so near the children – but she hadn't been expecting a litany of her so-called sins.

She arched an eyebrow.

Shay sighed and leaned back, scarred face twisting in a grimace. "(Look, Rai. You are my baby sister. I tolerate a lot from you and you know it. But I have my limits, and entertaining Muggles in your home is way outside them.)"

Rai remained silent for a moment, considering her reply. It was never prudent to simply tell the Head of the Family to stuff it – especially when the Lord was someone like Shay. Or worse, actually was General Akshay mal Théa. As he had said, he tolerated a lot of her oddities with a smile – up to and including the discovery of a young sphinx in the family castle that she had smuggled in from Egypt – and she didn't want to have that privilege taken away.

Oh, she wouldn't change, of course – but it was always better to have the Head of Family's blessing.

"(I want Reuben,)" she finally stated, regarding her brother with intelligent black eyes. "(And I want him unquestionably, so when they find out where he is...)" she trailed off, leaving the rest to her brother's imagination. He grimaced.

"(I still don't see how that Muggle fits into this.)"

"(She's a social worker, Shay. She had to come make sure Reuben is in a good situation now.)"

"(Why couldn't you just adopt the brat magically?)" he scowled. She smiled inwardly – the battle was won, and now she just needed to wipe out the survivors.

"(Because his guardians were Muggle, Shay, and the Old Man is a powerful and manipulative. If I don't cover the basis, then I leave him with some small right to the boy. And even without a right, we run the risk of him trying to kidnap Reuben if he ever finds out where he is. I want to be completely and indisputably right if I have to draw and quarter him for stealing my son.)" She said the last part fiercely, face twisting into a look very similar to the one her brother wore into battle.

Shay smiled involuntarily. If he understood anything unequivocally, it was politics, legality, and homicide. He nodded to his sister, whose face fell back into a more dignified expression.

"(Very well. But I don't want it to happen again.)"

Rai stood, bowed slightly and left. She waited until she was outside the manor to let her triumphant smile spread. Rai 26, Shay 3.

Brie smiled at Rosie as she placed a breakfast plate in front of him. He murmured a thank you, to which she ruffled his hair fondly. It was an action that would probably have been punished in another family – Rosie was only a servant, after all – but she was more like a friend than anything else. At least she was to Brie, who understood perfectly what it was like to be always working for other people.

He still couldn't quite believe that he had been rescued. Subconsciously the 6 year old was still half convinced that this was a dream, and he would wake up back in his cupboard after one of his old blackouts. That, more than anything, was what was allowing him to adjust so easily. If he was going to wake up back with the Big Man, he wanted to enjoy being loved and cherished by a real family.

A real family. Just like he'd always wanted.

Of course, he didn't think that even in his wildest dreams would he be able to dream up a family like the one he'd gotten. It was in these moments of clarity that he melted back down into a scared little boy, shivering and refusing to let anyone touch him. Because then he would realize that it wasn't a dream, but if it wasn't a dream than it was real but it couldn't be real because he was happy how could he be happy because the Big Man would beat him when he tried to ask questions and he deserved to be beaten because he was a bad little Freak and –

But it is a dream, he told himself firmly, shaking himself out of the downward spiral. So he should enjoy it while it lasted.

Because he would never be able to dream up a family like this again. Ever.

He remembered the first time he'd seen Mama Rai. She had seemed ten feet taller than anyone around her, a vengeful goddess wrapped in colorful cloth. She had been angry at the Big Man, and said things to make him look very very small. And then she had turned to him. She had smiled at him, and said "come to me, child." And he'd gone, because she was an angel, come to answer his

prayers – and even as she said angry things to the Big Man, she held his hand gently and stood between him and his tormenter.

The Woman who lived with the Big Man, the one who sometimes fed him and sometimes didn't, used to talk about God when she spoke to him at all. She said that God would deliver his children from the hands of evil and He would smite the devil. She always said the Freak was a devil to be smited, and would hit him in the name of her God.

But Mama had come, his very own angel. His very own goddess. And she had smote the devil and carried him home in her arms, even though he was filthy and she didn't look as though even her feet ever touched dirt.

Later he wondered why an angel looked like she did, and when he'd asked, she'd laughed. She'd let his curious fingers explore her expressive golden face and finger the beautiful green and blue cloth that fell around her like ocean waves. (Not that Brie had ever seen the ocean, though Mama promised to take him when it was warmer. He'd seen pictures, though.)

She was the most beautiful woman that Brie had ever seen. Her eyebrows were white like her funny spiky hair, and she admitted that she dyed them with a potion. Between her eyebrows was a little red dot that Brie was afraid to touch. She called it a bindi, and told him it was painted on, but that it wouldn't smear if he touched it. Her chin was pointed, her nose straight, and she wore a little diamond on one side of her nose. He'd asked her what it was, and she told him it was a sign that she was married, though she wasn't married anymore. He'd asked her why half of her ear was missing, and she'd grinned at him conspiratorially. "A dragon bit it off," she'd told him with a little smile. He wasn't sure he believed her, and looked at her skeptically. She'd promised to tell him the story someday.

She had a pretty laugh, and he'd wanted to make her laugh more. She had a pretty smile, too. He told her she always looked surprised when she smiled, and that had made her smile – and her eyes had looked surprised. That had made him laugh, too. She had big black eyes, and he'd stared at them for a very long time. He'd never met someone with black eyes before. She stared right back, and told him she'd never met anyone with green eyes like his, either. He said he'd rather have black eyes. Like his new Mama. She had hugged

him, and it was the very first hug he could ever remember, and he very nearly he cried. But he was 5, and a big boy, and if he cried the Big Man would find him.

He had met Ami three days after being put into the little hospital room. She had walked in while Mama was out talking to the doctors. He'd stared at her, and asked her if she was an angel too. She had said no, she wasn't, and had looked at him with cold brown eyes. Her face looked like a statue of one of the angels in The Woman's church, the angel of Death. He'd told her so, and she looked curious, so he told her about The Woman and her God. Ami had come in and sat on the bed and listened as if she really cared. And that made Brie feel very special, because Mama Rai was the only one who had ever acted like she cared what he said.

Ami had been the one to explain that she and her Mama didn't believe in the Christian God. She said they followed a religion called Hinduism, and she had told him beautiful stories of the gods and goddesses until he fell asleep. When he'd woken up the next day, Ami was sitting in a chair by his bed, reading. She'd noticed him looking, and she'd smiled at him, and it was like the statue of Death came alive. She stroked back his hair and talked with him some more, and after that, even though she didn't smile at him very often, her eyes were always happy to see him, and that was all that mattered.

He'd been there for a week or so when he met Uncle. Uncle was huge, but not huge like the Big Man. He hadn't seemed very happy with Brie at first, but later, after Mama took him home, Uncle had come to visit. He had knelt down next to Brie, put his big strong hands on Brie's tiny shoulders, and looked him straight in the eye. He'd said, "Gabriel, you are my sister's son. You are the son of my family, and I protect my own." It was the second time since the start of the dream that Brie almost cried.

Rosie was his first friend. She helped him and taught him about the house, even though, in the beginning, they couldn't speak the same language. She started teaching him French. When Mama Rai and Ami went off to school, he stayed with Rosie, who taught him everything he would need to know. He told her once, on a weekday, while Mama and Ami were gone, that when he grew up he wanted to marry her. She had laughed and patted him, and told him that she was sure he could find someone better than her. He told her that

there was no one in the world better than her, and she kissed him on the forehead and said he was a very sweet little boy, and she'd wait for him to grow up if that's what he wanted.

Now it was Christmas break, and Mama and Ami were home for a whole three weeks. There was snow everywhere, and when Ami took him outside to play, it had been so cold he couldn't feel his nose. Mama had laughed and took out her stick, said a funny word, and tapped him on the nose. Suddenly he could feel his nose again, and he'd been amazed. She explained magic to him, and he had nodded in acceptance. After all, whatever his Mama said was true, because she never lied.

She had ruffled his hair, and said that no, she would never, ever lie to him. She also said that if he wanted, after Christmas was over she would bring him to live in the school where she worked. He had said yes, thank you, and that he'd like that very much. She told him that growing up, Ami had lived with her there, too, and that if he should ask her about it before they left.

Ami told him all about the mansion called the Salem Academy, and told him about all the secret passage ways and hiding spots. She also told him which teachers to watch out for, and which students would play nicely with him. She told him about her special friend, Audric, who spoke French like they did. He was in his fourth year, and if Brie told him that his sister Ami sent him, then Audric would play with him too.

And so Christmas crept up on them, catching the new family up in the holiday cheer. It was going to be Gabriel's first real Christmas, and his girls were determined to make it the best ever. He made presents for all of them, and Rosie took him shopping so that he could pick out special things. He really couldn't wait.

A/N: That last bit wasn't quite stream of conscious or anything, but it's definitely supposed to be from the point of view of a six year old.

Someone asked about Rosie's language thing: She only speaks French. The pigeon English that she uses for Laura's benefit is stuff that she's memorized for when her mistress has English company. It's a bit like how, when you visit France, you learn to ask where the bathroom is – only Rosie learned words like 'coat' and 'shoes' and 'this way, please, thank you'. Hope that makes more sense to you.

Chapter Four: Changes

Kingsley Shacklebolt looked around himself with interest. The Muggle street was depressingly normal, as far as he could tell. It was just as lacking in personality and variety as every other Muggle street he'd explored in this unrewarding hunt for the Boy-Who-Lived.

When Dumbledore had first contacted him, the young Auror had been excited to have an important solo mission – even if it was to be kept strictly confidential, hidden even from the Ministry. The past few months had led him to regret his misguided decision to accept the task. It was thankless, fruitless, lonely, and was killing his career. He'd already been passed over for a promotion because he was away on 'personal business' so often.

He had told Dumbledore he'd had enough. If he didn't find Potter by the end of the month, he was going to return his attention to building his own future.

Oh, he understood the boy's importance as a symbol. How could he not, what with Dumbledore constantly reminding him that if (when, Dumbledore insisted) the Dark Lord came back, Potter's presence would be invaluable. Or, more pressing, how disastrous it would be if the wrong people got their hands on the boy.

Like those awful Muggles, Kingsley thought sorrowfully. He had finally hunted down the Dursleys earlier that month – or at least what was left of them. Petunia Dursley was dead; shot by her own husband in her own living room. Dudley Dursley was in the custody of his aunt while Vernon Dursley was in a maximum security prison after a highly publicized trial. That had been how Kingsley had finally been able to find them at all.

He had been just about ready to give up his search. He'd gone through every method for finding people that he had learned in Auror training, and none turned up anything. It had been a rather humbling experience to stop trying and to have his answers fall in his lap. Almost literally.

Sitting down in a Muggle café, he'd overheard the name "Dursley" in conjunction with "this morning's paper." He'd promptly snagged an abandoned paper from a nearby table and perused it for clues. He didn't have to look very hard. On the front page was plastered the

scowling face of a very fat Muggle with the headline "Mad Dursley Convicted on All Counts!" The article had gone on in enough detail to make Kingsley's stomach clench.

For the murder of his wife, Dursley would serve a life term. For criminal neglect, child abuse, and the suspect disappearance of one Harry James Potter, Dursley would serve 25 years without parole.

If ever a man deserved Azkaban, it was this one.

Kingsley wasn't the only one who seemed to think so. The article was filled with outrage and sorrow for the wife, son, and missing – presumed dead – nephew.

Questioning Dursley proved to be a waste of time. The only thing that Kingsley got out of the interview was a very sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. He was horrified that Dumbledore had put Harry Potter with this man, and then left him on his own.

Magical means had failed to find the boy, there were no mundane leads, and Dursley couldn't – or wouldn't – tell him anything he didn't already know. Kingsley couldn't help but begin to believe that the Boy-Who-Lived lived no longer.

(All conversations are in French)

It was Christmas. Brie's first ever Christmas, and it had been better than he had ever dreamed. He had gotten presents from everyone, and had, for the first time, been able to give presents. Kali, for the first time he actually had people to give gifts to! It was an amazing feeling.

Toys, clothes, books, sweets... Everything a boy could wish for. Uncle Shay had given him a strange toy that looked a lot like the squirt guns Dudley used to get, only his was gray and very heavy. When Mama saw it, she had taken it away very quickly. She spent a whole fifteen minutes yelling at Uncle Shay in the pretty language she always used when she was saying things she didn't want Brie to understand.

Later, Ami gave it back to him after she made him promise to never touch the thing called the 'safety,' and promise that he wouldn't play with it unless she or Uncle Shay was helping. He promised and she

hung it up on the wall, much higher than he could reach by himself. It looked very cool, though, so he didn't complain.

Christmas evening they had dinner at Shay's house with all of the mal Théas. It had been extremely overwhelming to Brie and he hadn't been able to stay in the ballroom for very long before he'd retreated, shaking, to a corner. He'd hidden behind some plants for almost an hour before someone found him.

He was curled up as small as he could make himself, keeping his breathing very quiet. If the Big Man heard, he would come, and if he came then the Freak – Brie! Gabriel! Harry! Not the Fr... Not that. Brie. Rueben. He'd been startled out of his panicked thoughts by a strange gurgling noise, followed by a string of nonsense sounds. There was a rustling, and suddenly a dark head poked into his hiding place.

She was tiny. Harmless, Brie registered, though he remained tense as the child toddled into his sanctuary. Upon spotting him, she waddled over, hands outstretched. At first he didn't try to back away, completely off-balance. Chubby hands patted his pale cheeks, and he jerked away from the contact. The girl's amber eyes widened, and she fell onto her bottom with a look of surprise.

The two stared at each other for another moment, sizing each other up. Or, at least Brie sized up the girl-child...

As he had originally observed, she was small. She had dark skin and dark hair, which weren't precisely distinguishing features in their family. Her curly hair was tied back with an abnormally large red bow, and Brie couldn't help feeling a surge of sympathy for the child. After all, anyone forced to wear such a monstrosity deserved sympathy. Her dress was similarly frilly, and the little boy wondered how such a little person could move in such a big dress.

About this time, the little girl regained her bearings. Giggling and gurgling, she crawled forward to settle into Brie's lap. He was quite surprised to suddenly have a lap full of girl-baby and frills. He recovered masterfully, however, and was soon engaged in a rousing game of patty cake with the adorable child.

"I'm Brie," he introduced after a few games.

"Bwhee!" the girl exclaimed happily. Brie smiled and nodded. "Fae," she informed him gravely, and that was that.

It was the day after Christmas that changed Brie's life. He was curled up in his bed with one of his new books, dressed in new pajamas and wearing colorful new socks. Everything was perfect in his world. The dream was going exactly as he would've dreamed it (was dreaming it, he reminded himself quickly) and Christmas had been everything he had ever imagined it could be.

"Rueben? Darling, may I come in?"

Brie looked up and slipped a marker into his book. "Yes Mama," he called as he sat up in bed.

Rai slipped into the room and shut the door softly behind her. Making her way over to her son, she settled onto the bed beside him. She reached out with one henna-decorated hand and stroked his pale cheek while he watched her curiously. There was another moment of silence before Rai's hand dropped and she turned to gaze out the window.

"Gabriel," she began softly, causing Brie to jerk slightly. She never called him just Gabriel. "You are the son of my heart," she told him softly, reaching out to gather him onto her lap. "You are my son in everything but blood." Once again she trailed off into silence, absently stroking his hair.

Brie remained silent, not sure what was happening. He felt a surge of conflicting emotions. He was the son of her heart – was that affirmation? But he was not her son in blood – was she regretful? Was she thinking about having a son of her own? If she did, would Brie still have a place in her heart? Compared to a real son, what would he be worth?

"I wanted to," she paused, as if struggling with her words. Brie found this very odd, as Mama Rai had never been at a loss for words before. "I wanted to offer you... To ask you if you would consent to become my son in blood as well."

You could have heard a pin drop.

Pale, Brie sat on his foster mother's lap, completely blind-sided. Become her son in blood? How?

As if sensing his confusion, she hurried to explain. "There's a potion, darling, and a ritual. Very old," she paused before adding, delicately, "and illegal. It would, mm, change you. You would lose some of the features you have now, and gain the features of a mal Théa." She touched his hair thoughtfully as he remained still and silent. "It... it would be very painful, I understand. It would change you permanently, at the deepest level." She squeezed his shoulders, then continued talking. "I would wait until you were older, when you would be better able to decide for yourself, but the older you are, the more painful and dangerous it becomes. Beyond ten, people are known to die from this ritual." Another silence. Finally, "If you don't want to, or if you would rather wait, that is fine. I love you, and I will support anything you decide."

Brie remained silent, and after awhile Rai got up and left. "I'll be in my lab," she told him gently, "if you need me."

He didn't even hear her leave.

Rai pursed her lips as she sprinkled the dried Gurdyroot into the softly bubbling cauldron. She held her breath as she slowly stirred counterclockwise. At this moment, the experimental potion was extremely volatile. So far, every time she had tried to move on from this stage it had exploded rather spectacularly. According to her theory, she ought to be able to add the belladonna and dittany to the base. So what was going wrong?

"Mama?"

Rai jumped slightly as the little voice spoke from a few paces behind her elbow. Her hand twitched and the rest of the Gurdyroot was dumped into the potion with a faint sizzle. Reacting on instinct, she hurled herself back, hitting her son and forcing him down. She curled her body around his, waiting for the explosion she knew would come next.

It never came.

The potion bubbled and muttered dangerously, but remained in the cauldron. She blinked. Oh! Of course! She'd had to lower the

amount of Gurdyroot she put in the potion, because it had to be stirred in to counteract the trace of deadly nightshade – if she put more in without stirring, it would be able to absorb the dittany and hold the effects stable.

Her hands twitched slightly, anxious to grab a pen and scribble down her thoughts, but she had a son to deal with first. She sat up, helping a wide-eyed Brie to sit up as well.

"Are you ok, Reuben?"

He nodded, green eyes staring up at her in anxiety. "I'm sorry, Mama," he whispered, looking away to the side. "I... I didn't mean to ruin your potion." He looked as though he halfway expected her to hit him.

Rai's mouth tightened slightly, and she reached out slowly to gather him into her arms. He flinched once, then melted into her embrace. This close, she could feel the slight tremors running through her body, and she was forced to wonder how much was from the almost-exploded cauldron and how much was fear that his foster mother would hit him.

"No, baby," she murmured, rubbing his back in soothing circles. "I'm not mad. You waited until there was a pause in my brewing; it was my fault for not hearing you come in. I told you to come down if you needed to talk, remember? I'm happy to see you." They were silent for a moment as she continued to rub his back, then she gave a slight snort of laughter. "Wanna hear a secret?"

Brie made a little sound in the back of his throat, somewhere between an animal moan and a humming 'mhmm' sort of sound.

"Well," she told him, pulling back so that he could see her face. "You just saved my theory!"

"Re-really?" he looked up at her with those big eyes, and she brushed dark hair back behind his ear.

"Really," she assured him. "I would never have thought to add more Gurdyroot after I had stopped stirring! Hours of work, and you just saved them all!"

He attempted a smile for her, and she stroked his hair again. They sat on the floor for a moment longer, then she stood up. Reaching down, she hoisted her six year old foster son up onto her hip and walked over to the padded bench near the sink. Any other six year old boy would be far too large for tiny Rai to pick up, let alone carry. Brie was still well within her carrying capacity, despite a rigorous nutrition routine. She swore he was resistant to the effects of her potions, but there was no way for her to prove it.

"So," she smiled as they both settled onto the bench. "You wanted to talk to me?"

Brie nodded, chewing on his lip as his eyes swept across her lab. Usually she would tell him to release the poor lip at once, but this time she left him the comforting gesture. If he wanted to talk about the ritual, well, she wasn't going to do anything that might make him uncomfortable.

"Ms Rai, why do you want me?" It was said with such heartbreaking innocence that Rai had to smother the urge to find that fat man and kill him, then resurrect him and kill him again. How dare he damage her son?

"Because you are my son. Because that's what mothers do. They want and love unconditionally. And I want you, little boy, because you are a beautiful person. You are intelligent, and respectful, and funny. You are... yourself." She paused, mind groping for some way to reassure the child without sounding false.

"Would you like to hear a story?"

Green eyes reflected confusion, but Brie nodded anyways. Rai smiled down at him, trying to decide how to word everything she wanted to convey to him in words he would understand.

"Once upon a time," she began softly, "two people loved each other very, very much. They were very young and very happy. They wanted to spend forever together, and more. They got married, and life was wonderful. And then a bad man came, and they were forced to hide themselves. It was a nightmare for them. For the first time, they were scared and the world was a dark place. But they still loved each other."

Brie was giving her his full attention, riveted on her words. Years of oral practice with Indian epics was suddenly paying off, as her lilting voice captured the little boy and swept him away.

"And even though the world was dark around them, something amazing happened. Do you know what, Reuben?"

Brie shook his head. "No, Mama," he whispered.

"They had a baby. A beautiful, laughing baby with eyes as green as emeralds," Rai touched the corner of his eye. "And hair so black that it made their dark world look bright," she ruffled the little boy's hair. "Who had his mother's pale beauty and his father's happiness," her golden fingers stroked Brie's white cheeks, then touched his nose in a slightly playful gesture. He smiled uncertainly back at her.

"They named him Harry, for his grandfather, and James, for his father. He made their world bright." A tiny intake of breath let her know that Brie had just caught on to exactly what this story was all about.

"But then something happened," Rai continued softly, returning to rubbing soft circles on his back. "The bad man found the little family, and he couldn't bear their happiness. So he pinched them out, like you might pinch out the flame of a candle." Rai paused for a moment of silence, both to allow her words to sink in and in remembrance for the dead.

Another little humming noise caught her attention, and she looked down to find huge green eyes staring at her as if she held all the answers to the universe. With a sad smile, she wiped away the tears that escaped those little eyes. Of course. No one had ever really told him about his parents before. She hadn't been positive about his identity herself until a week and a half ago.

It was only right that he knew their story before he made a decision about the ritual.

"But they kept burning, Reuben. That man thought he could snuff them out, but they kept burning. Oh, not so that the bad man could see them. Their flames were added to the flame of their precious little boy, and he burned all the brighter. But the bad man couldn't

see that. He tried to put out the flame of their beloved son, but he couldn't. The little boy, just a baby, burned him when he tried."

She paused again, offering Brie the edge of her sari to blow his nose on. She could clean it easily enough later. She wrapped the trailing end around him, pulling him closer to her and encasing him in the colorful fabric. He snuggled in, focused completely on her story.

"So the bad man went away, and the world got bright again – all because of that little boy, and the sacrifices those two beautiful, happy people made for him. This is where, in the story, the little boy is supposed to get a chance at new life and new happiness. But a powerful person made a mistake, and little Harry, who had done so much for the world, was forgotten. He was given to terrible people, and they tried to put out his light, too. They tried their hardest to blow out his candle, but they couldn't. He was too bright and too strong for them."

Rai squeezed Brie's shoulders again. He was trembling, and she hurried on. She wanted him to think about James and Lily Potter, not those freakish Muggles who had treated him so horribly.

"And one day, a mother found that little boy. She looked into his emerald eyes, and she opened up her heart. She opened her arms and the little boy ran to her. She carried him away from his gray world. His flame began to burn brightly again, as she used her own fire to help him grow. Because that is what mothers do, and she was a mother. Later, she found out about those two people who had loved each other forever and more, and who had given everything they had to the child of her heart. And every night she said a prayer, thanking them for what they had done for her little boy."

It was true. Rai had never been much for appreciation or gratitude, but this was one exception. Lily and James Potter were definitely in her good graces, and in her opinion they deserved far more respect and recognition than they got. After all, they had managed to produce this beautiful boy in her arms.

"So you see, Reuben? How could anybody not want you? You burn so brightly! And to think, lovely child, how lucky we are! You were brought into this world by two people who loved you very much, and then you were brought to me, for me to love. Do you understand?"

Brie was silent except for his soft crying, but he nodded his head in understanding. Rai closed her eyes and pulled him tighter against her.

Brie looked around with wide-eyed interest. The Entrance Hall of the Salem Academy was long and glaringly white. Tall columns were evenly spaced between huge floor length windows. The morning sun flooded the marble floor. It was enough to hurt the eyes.

"Come along, Rueben," his mother raised an eyebrow at him. Blushing slightly, he hurried over to her side, taking hold of her offered hand. She gave him a reassuring squeeze before leading him the rest of the way down the hall. Soon the Hallway opened up into a huge circular atrium lined with doors, pillars, skylights, and more windows. In the center was an elaborate fountain made of more white marble.

His mother led him through one of the far doors and through a series of identical, dazzlingly white hallways. Brie tried to count turns at first, but soon found himself thoroughly lost when they came out into another circular room. Before there had been normal intersections, but by now the boy felt so turned around that he almost thought they were back where they had started.

The fountain was different, though, he noticed.

"This is the professors' circle," his mother told him, leading him to the fountain. She pointed to various doors and began to name the professor who stayed in each. Brie let the information go in one ear and out the other. For now, the names didn't mean a whole lot to the six year old.

"And this is our room," she finished, leading him to the third door on the left.

The room, he found with relief, was not more mind-numbing white marble. It was decorated in a soothing dark green, and was definitely a sight for sore eyes. Literally, he thought with a giggle.

He let go of his mother's hand to explore, quickly discovering that calling it a "room" was not strictly accurate. Although there were no actual doors other than the one leading back to the fountain, the

room was portioned off into several distinct areas.

He found his corner easily, as his things had already been moved there. "It's perfect, Mama," he turned to smile at her. She smiled back at him and nodded once before walking off in the other direction.

Brie spent the next hour rearranging his room the way he wanted it. He still took great delight in being allowed to not only have things, but also being allowed to display them any way he liked. During the first week with Mama Rai and Ami, he had been too scared to touch any of the things they said were for him. Now he took great delight in moving everything around to suit his rather mutable whims.

When everything was perfect, he began to explore the rest of the apartment. It was small compared to their house in the mountains, but it was still huge by his estimation. He loved it already.

"Rueben?"

"Yes Mama?" He looked up from where he was lounging in the sun in their new sitting room. His mother raised an eyebrow at him, but didn't comment on his position on the carpet. Instead, she settled herself cross legged on one of the floor cushions, leaning forward to watch him with amusement.

"So? What do you think, my son?"

Brie sat up, pulling his knees to his chest. "I like it," he replied shyly, looking out the window onto what appeared to be a garden. "It's very nice." He flashed a quick smile as he added, "the hallways will take some getting used to. They are... dazzling."

"They are, aren't they," she mused, giving him a bright smile. "Don't worry too much. You'll adjust quickly, I'm sure. And have a lovely time getting lost..."

Brie giggled slightly at that, burying his little face in his knees to muffle the sound. He felt his mother ruffle his hair and listened to the soft pat of her bare feet exiting the room.

Their first day at the Academy passed quietly. A house elf brought them dinner and managed to give Brie a bit of a scare. He'd never seen one of the strange little creatures before, and while he had accepted the existence of magic with a dismissive shrug, he hadn't really stopped to consider what ramifications it might have.

Such as the possibility of there being "magical creatures."

Rai explained everything to him over dinner – including the place of house elves in society and how he was to treat them. Brie nodded along, though he wasn't quite sure he would be able to so casually dismiss the odd servants. After all, he knew first hand what it felt like to be so thoroughly ignored. His mother must have guessed something of his train of thought, as she didn't press the issue. Instead, she began telling him about some of the other magical creatures that existed in their world.

As they waited for the table to be cleared for dessert, Brie decided to ask a question that had started nagging at him during the second course. "Mama, do you remember when you told me how you... how you lost your ear?" He bit his lip and looked over at her as a slice of chocolate cake appeared on his plate.

"Yes." She took a small bite of her own cake, hiding a smirk. She knew exactly where this was going, and she'd been wondering how long it would take before her new son asked for the full story.

"Well," he shifted slightly in his seat, small face scrunching up in serious thought. "I just thought, since you said dragons are real, does that mean...?" He looked at her with those big green eyes that she found so hard to resist, and she caved immediately.

"Yes, Rueben," she grinned. "It means I really did lose the ear to a dragon."

"How?" he cried, leaning forward in excitement.

She paused, pointedly taking another bite of cake and chewing slowly. Brie was nearly bouncing in his seat, but he restrained himself. "Well," she began slowly, enjoying the way the child's eyes sparkled. "It happened such a long time ago, I'm not really sure I remember..." She gave a theatrically melancholy sigh and was rewarded with a melodramatic groan.

"Mama! You don't forget anything! Everyone knows that."

"Not anything, mm?"

"Nothing," the boy repeated firmly. "And you're not that old," he added as an after thought. Rai chuckled at that, abandoning the table in favor of walking into the sitting room and settling in the window seat. Brie scampered after her, cake untouched.

"Well," she started again, "I was very young. About your age, actually," she flicked his nose gently, earning a bright smile. "Shay took me to a Reserve, because I kept bugging him about wanting to see real dragons. While we were taking the tour, he turned his back on me and I, of course, ran off." Rai's black eyes sparkled and Brie giggled. He was quite familiar with his mother's sense of mischief.

"I managed to get myself over to the place they kept the little baby dragons. I was hiding in there, and what do you know! This little dragon baby starts hissing at me from the opposite corner. Oh, it was the most adorable thing you'll ever see, I promise!"

Brie tried to raise an eyebrow in disbelief but only managed in a rather cute look of befuddlement. "It was hissing at you, and you thought it was adorable?"

Rai ruffled his hair as she laughed. "Absolutely."

"Riiight."

"Well, do you want me to tell you the story or not?"

"Go on!" he immediately encouraged, grinning in excitement. After all, it was exciting, whether or not it was strictly true. "Sooo there was the cute, hissing dragon, and..."

"And I decided that I had to have it." She said it simply, keeping her face completely straight as her son stared at her in consternation. "So I started trying to play with it. It took awhile, but eventually it came over to me and we kept playing. It wouldn't touch me, but it was perfectly willing to play games."

"But how did you lose your ear?" Brie pressed when she paused, urging her to keep talking.

"It's all Shay's fault, really," she smirked as Brie's eyebrows shot up. "He got everyone on the place looking for me, and one of the workers came barging into our little corner. The poor dragon got startled, and snapped out at the nearest thing – which just happened to be my ear!"

Her pronouncement seemed to have missed its mark, however, as she was greeted with a skeptical glance from the six year old.

"What? Don't you believe me?"

Apparently he didn't, as his face got even more disbelieving.

"Well then!" she threw her hands in the air in mock exasperation. "Fancy that. The lad doesn't believe his dear old mother's carefully crafted and very old story."

"If it bit your ear," he pointed out slowly, "why did it only take the top half?"

"Because it had a little mouth," she retorted promptly.

"Then why didn't you have it re-grown?" he shot back.

"I'm allergic to dragonsbane," she answered airily. "They had to give me some to stop the poison, and to give me enough to re-grow the ear would've killed me."

Brie was silent for a minute, considering her story. Finally he gave one last shot at catching her in a tall tale. "How did Uncle Shay survive Grandpa and Grandma when they found out?"

Rai burst out laughing. She had no answer for that one.

(The conversations in this section are English)

The Salem Auditorium was large – even bigger than the ballroom in Uncle Shay's house, Brie noted with awe. Like the rest of the school, there were windows, skylights, pillars, and all together too much white. One long table lay opposite the "grand entrance," and was

already partially occupied. It was raised a few steps, and Brie identified it as the place for the old people to sit.

Mama led him up the steps and selected a spot. To her left sat an older gentleman with a white beard (more white! ugh!) and a blue dress. (Well, not really a dress – but Brie still wasn't quite sure he approved of these robe thingies that boys were supposed to wear.) Brie clambered up onto the seat on her right, continuing his silent inspection.

The room was arrayed with circular tables, seating anywhere from four to fourteen people. They were empty now, but there were places set, and Brie figured that this is where all the kids would be sitting. It made sense, he decided, approving of the setup. (Of course, he still wasn't too keen on the white tablecloths, white chairs, white porcelain plates... the list went on. These people really needed some imagination.)

"Miss Rai, welcome back," the old man greeted his mother as she gracefully sat down.

"Thank you Malcolm. I trust nothing too extravagant took place during my absence?"

The old man – Malcolm? – gave a wheezing chuckle. "Your troublemakers laid low, not to worry. Someone gave Samantha a fright, but I don't think it was one of yours. It was too sloppy – those rascals of yours are better at covering their tracks." There was another wheezing chuckle as the man reached out to pat Rai's hand.

"Hmmm," was all Mama would say.

"I see you brought another youngling," Malcolm smiled, leaning forward to look at Brie. Brie stared back with curious green eyes, and the old man's bushy eyebrows rose in surprise. "And who might you be?" he inquired.

After a quick glance at his mother for permission, Brie gave the old man a tentative smile. "Gabriel Reuben-Amrit mal Théa, sir."

"Quite a mouthful, that one." The man gave him a kind smile. "Do you like Salem so far?"

"It's very bright," Brie replied honestly. He had long since mastered the art of saying nice things when he was thinking bad things, and still somehow manage to be telling the absolute truth. After all, anything less was likely to earn... Well, better not to think about it at the moment.

The man laughed, slapping his knee. Brie found this behavior strange, but didn't comment. The man's laughter trailed off, and he returned to inspecting Brie with a benevolent smile. "You'll get used to it, lad. No doubt you'll be causing trouble in a week. You have the look of your mother about you."

Brie ducked his head, hiding behind a curtain of dark curls. He looked like Mama. Other people saw that he looked like Mama! His newly golden brown hands fiddled with the edge of his shirt as his bright green eyes sparkled with something between happiness and tears. It's a dream. Remember it's just a dream, and everything will be fine!

Somehow, the thought wasn't so comforting anymore.

A/N: Quick clarification: yes, they did the ritual. Harry Potter aka Gabriel mal Théa has curly black hair, golden brown skin, and is slightly taller than he might otherwise have turned out, malnutrition aside. (I imagine HP would've been taller had he not been starved as a child – GmT is the height HP should have been, plus a little extra). His scars are covered by a glamour. He still has Lily's eyes.

Chapter Five: "Conflict"

The first week of classes flew by without Brie's notice. He spent most of his time in the familiar territory of the Professors' Circle, and he'd been getting to know some of the teachers. Most seemed to like him, a reaction he found odd but enjoyable.

Malcolm - or Professor Whitehorn, as the students called him - was by far his favorite. The elderly man taught the History of Magic, which Brie found fascinating. Malcolm seemed to enjoy having someone who hung on his every word, and spent hours telling the young boy lively stories about historical witches, wizards, and events. The battles were Brie's favorite. He and Malcolm even sat down with Brie's toy soldiers and reenacted several, to both boys' great delight.

Professor Stephanie Locke taught Astronomy, and promised Brie that she would sneak him out for a lesson sometime when his mother was busy. She'd looked both ways as she'd said it and seemed to think it would be a marvelous thing to pull one over on Sarai mal Théa.

The Herbology instructor, Professor Tierra Yewande, had been delighted to discover that Brie had some small experience with plants, and promptly appropriated him to the greenhouses for an afternoon twice a week. There she told him stories of her childhood in Africa between spirited explanations of her beloved plants.

Klaus Sullivan was the Care of Magical Creatures Professor and was rather fond of Brie's mother, as dangerous creatures were a hobby of hers. He had little time for children, however, and most of what Brie learned from him came from overhearing his conversations with Rai.

Professor Rose Stevens taught Healing and was the school's primary physician. Brie quickly found her to be a well of information regarding Ami's stay at Salem. "Your sister haunted the Infirmary," Rose told him once. "I started feeling like I had a pint-sized shadow. She had the talent, though... Mark my words, that girl is going to be a first rate Healer one of these days."

Not all teachers were so fond of him, though. Brie quickly learned to avoid Professor Cyrus Melville, who taught Divination and was convinced that there was a dark prophecy following Gabriel around.

He also insisted that "Gabriel" was not Brie's "True Name" and refused to call him anything but 'boy.' Brie also learned to avoid the school's bad-tempered Headmaster, who didn't seem to care for children very much.

Other professors had other stories to share and Brie was hardly able to sort through the wealth of information he received every day. He had already been invited to sit in on various classes, and he was nearly to the point where he would feel comfortable leaving familiar territory. Next Monday, he decided, he would go sit in on some of Malcolm's classes.

"So you're mal Théa's brat." The speaker's tone was curious and lacking any discernable malice. Brie looked shyly up at the fourth year. The boy was tall and lean, with sandy brown hair, intense gray eyes, and square glasses. Like everything else in the school, the student uniform was white, and this boy wore the brown lining of a South Tower. He didn't seem at all surprised to see Brie sitting in the History classroom.

"Yes," Brie replied carefully. He still wasn't used to interacting with other children. "Who are you?"

"Audric," the boy introduced, thumping his books onto the desk beside Brie. "Audric Sinclair."

Ami's "special friend," Brie deduced, immediately interested. "Gabriel," Brie replied, green eyes focused completely on the older boy. "But you knew that."

Audric grinned over at him as he finished arranging his supplies for class. "Yeah," he agreed amiably. "You enjoying the Asylum so far?"

It took Brie a moment to realize that Audric was referring to the Academy, and he giggled. "It's too white," he confided to his new companion. "And it is so boring! Do you ever forget what colors look like?" he inquired innocently, earning a startled laugh.

"That's what the PA is for, kid," Audric grinned, reaching out to ruffle Brie's hair. Brie flinched away automatically and it took him a moment to harness the sudden rush of adrenaline. Audric pulled his hand back with a raised eyebrow, looking slightly concerned. He didn't comment, though, for which the six year old was very glad.

"The PA?" Brie asked after a moment.

"Pranksters Anonymous," Audric smirked, leaning in conspiratorially. "It's a very well kept public secret. We think your mother's the one who started it up, the mad bat." This was said fondly, so Brie didn't take offense. Instead, he indicated for Audric to continue.

"It's like... organized crime, except with pranks. They've done some incredibly sophisticated ones over the years, and they're really good at covering their tracks." The boy's eyes were twinkling, inviting Brie to share in his excited amusement.

"Are you part of the PA?" Brie asked, cocking his head slightly.

"No," Audric shook his head, looking a bit depressed for a moment. "I'm too bookish for them. I've done some research for the cause, though," he added proudly.

Brie was about to ask what sort of research when a dry cough came from the front of the room. The students quieted down and Malcolm started the lecture. Soon Brie forgot all about Pranks, drawn into the fascinating history of the Wizarding pilgrimage to America.

One Month Later

Brie stared around the Auditorium with delight. It was colorful! Someone had shoved the tables into the four compass points and color coded them. Brown for South Tower, Dark Gray for North Tower, Indigo for East Tower, and Turquoise for West Tower. Each set of tables was surrounded by a transfigured fortress, with drawbridges and catapults and everything. Even the Teacher's Table had been replaced with a siege tower that had retained its white coloration. The rest of the Auditorium had been charmed to look like an open grassy field.

Around him the students were chattering in excitement, and some of the bolder ones had already taken up residence in their color-coded fortresses, looking as though they were holding counsels of war. His mother looked slightly smug, and several of the teachers were giving her exasperated looks.

"Professor mal Théa," the Headmaster began in a severe undertone, face tight with anger. "I really must protest."

"Protest all you like," Rai replied airily, spreading her open palms. "This is not my doing - My Word on the matter."

Hissing angrily, the man spun and began demanding the attention of the students. It was not to be had. They had all taken up position in their castles and were finishing up their war councils. The first catapulted load of mashed potatoes arced gracefully through the air, splattering against and inside North Tower's defenses. South Tower cheered at their good aim, and North Tower roared in amiable protest.

Food was flying all across the room, powered by transfigured war machines. Most of the professors had prudently retreated to their siege tower, and Rai was trying to convince Malcolm and Klaus to help her return fire. While his mother was thus occupied, Brie snuck away.

Sneaking around the war zone proved easier than expected, and Brie swarmed up the back wall of the South Tower. Audric called a greeting to him from his position behind one of the catapults, which called the attention of... well, 'the Commander of the Brown Forces' seemed an appropriate title to the child's mind.

The Seventh Year gleefully set Brie up as their Chief Reconnaissance Agent (Audric had to explain that this meant 'our only spy') and sent him off to North Tower. By the time Brie got back, the professor's siege tower had been drawn into the fight, and the Headmaster was apoplectic.

The War of the Towers ended with everyone victorious (except Headmaster Smithson, who had finally retreated, bright red and covered in food.) It had been by far the biggest food fight in the school's history, and everyone gave three cheers for the PA when it was over.

In punishment, the entire student body had to help in the clean up. The mood was relaxed and friendly, however, the excitement of the War still prevalent. After the last chair was put in its rightful place, the students were treated to a scolding lecture.

Sitting beside his mother, Brie ignored the diatribe in favor of watching the student body. They seemed to care about the lecture about as much as he did, which was not at all. Although none of them dared break the silence, they made their inattention quite obvious as half the student body dozed on their neighbors' shoulders.

"When I find those responsible for this..." the Headmaster wound up, trailing off in what he imagined was a threatening tone.

"SHRI DID IT!" came the vigorous collective response of the student body, causing Brie to jump back with a startled gasp and whirl to stare at his smirking mother. She placed a finger across her lips, and he subsided for the moment.

Angrily, the Headmaster dismissed everyone, adding that curfew was an hour earlier for the next three weeks. Like the previous punishment, this didn't seem to bother the students too much as they chattered loudly on their way back to their Towers.

"Shri did it?" Brie prompted curiously as his mother and Malcolm walked together toward the Professors' Circle.

The two adults exchanged a glance above his head.

"Our non-existent resident poltergeist," Rai informed him with a grin.

"The trickster spirit that doesn't actually exist here," Malcolm clarified at Brie's blank stare. "The students began blaming any and all pranks on 'Shri' years ago... About when your mother showed up, in fact," he shot Rai a dry look. "It's become the standard response now. Even I'm half convinced there really is a poltergeist hiding out somewhere," he smiled.

With a cheerful goodnight, the old man drifted off.

Two Months Later

Rai stared sadly down at the little boy, shaking and cowering in his sleep. It had been getting worse for months now, and even her gentle lullabies were no longer keeping the terrors away.

Yesterday her son had fallen victim to a panic attack when the Sinclair boy had hugged him. The week before, he had fled the History of Magic classroom when two students began arguing, and had disappeared for six hours. She finally found him curled up in a deserted hallway, rocking and whispering to himself. It had taken half an hour to calm him and coax him into her arms.

What would be next? He had been through so much... Vishnu preserve her, Rueben had been through so much. It wasn't fair that this was happening to him too. What horrible crime had he committed in his past life to inherit such karma?

Steering her thoughts brutally away from that train of thought, she began singing an old Indian lullaby, stroking her son's sweat-soaked curls in an attempt to comfort him. This was all she could do for him...

-Conversations in Hindi-

"Take care of him, Shay. Please." Rai's face was tight with suppressed anguish, and it was all her overprotective brother could do to stop from pulling her into his arms and holding her.

"Of course, little sister," he soothed, squeezing his dazed nephew's hand. "As if he were my own."

"Thank you." She watched as he swept the little boy into his arms, cradling him gently. Dosed with a strong calming potion, the little boy didn't object.

"I will make a soldier out of him," Shay promised, touching the child's golden cheek.

"I don't need a soldier," Rai responded distantly, her attention focused on the little boy. "I need a son whose heart is whole. Don't break him, Shay. He is already broken. Just put him back together and lead him safe."

"My Word on it, sister." With a last grave nod, he turned away, precious burden cradled in his arms.

Some Time Later

- Conversations in French -

Jean-Pierre Dupree trembled slightly under the powerful stare of the Parisian Butcher. The little boy standing in front of the counter set down the last wand in the store, a slight frown the only expression he'd shown all day. Jean-Pierre wanted both of them out, out, out of his store.

"I'm sorry, Lord mal Théa! There are simply no wands sufficiently compatible with your nephew!" He nervously plucked up the wand the boy had just finished trying and stuck it in its box, just for something to do.

"That is unacceptable," mal Théa informed him, voice hard.

Jean-Pierre winced. Of course it was unacceptable! There wasn't a lot he could do about it, though. He could only hope that the General wouldn't take some sort of revenge on him.

"Perhaps," Jean-Pierre mentally scrambled for some sort of answer for why he didn't have this child's wand. It had never happened that he didn't have the wand of a French child who needed one.

Inspiration struck.

"Perhaps," he repeated, steeling himself, "the boy was born elsewhere?" He tried to keep the hope out of his voice. He was setting himself up for potential embarrassment – though now that he thought about it, he was fairly certain that Sarai mal Théa's daughter had been born and raised in America, so there was a chance that this boy had been born outside of France as well. Please, please let that be true...

"Why would that matter?" The little boy was looking at him as he asked, his small face almost completely devoid of expression. Only a quick flicker of the eyes betrayed the fact that he was watching his uncle very closely.

Seizing on the opportunity to get them out of his shop with as little damage to his person and his reputation as possible, Jean-Pierre eagerly began to explain it to the eight year old. He was aware, of course, that he was explaining it to the Butcher at the same time, but he took pains to pretend not to notice.

"Well lad, wands are unique magical creations – a wand is created for one wizard, and one wizard alone. It is possible for a well trained wizard to use a similar wand, but only their own wands will ever allow them to reach their full potential."

The little boy raised an eyebrow and Jean-Pierre coughed slightly. Right. Moving on. He hated Traditionalists – somehow they all managed to produce really creepy kids.

"For the purpose of visualization, imagine that each wand has a unique spirit. That spirit has always existed, waiting to be called into being by her wizard. Often it is the birth of the wizard that triggers a wand maker to create their wand – those are the wands that always get tested first, the ones made close to the birth of the wizard. Sometimes it's the first sign of accidental magic that triggers the creation, which is generally the case for Muggleborns."

Jean-Pierre risked a glance at the mildly impatient visage of the Lord mal Théa. Taking a deep breath, the wand maker plowed ahead.

"In rare cases, a wand is even created before the birth of her wizard. An event can trigger the inevitability of a wizard's birth, and the wand will be created in anticipation. These tend to be extremely powerful wands."

"Why does location matter?" the boy repeated his early question. Jean-Pierre cursed his tendency to babble when nervous. Right. Location.

"A wand will always be born in close proximity to where her wizard was or will be born. All wizards born in France will find their wands in my shop. All wizards born in Ireland will find their wands in Cormac O'Brien's shop, etcetera. If there is a chance you were born in another country, that country is where you will find your wand."

Without a word of thanks, the older mal Théa turned and left the shop, the younger promptly following on his heels. Jean-Pierre let out a little sigh. Finally. Slowly he began to pack away his wands.

- Conversations in English -

Ollivander looked up in surprise as the door to his shop opened. It was very rare to have visitors outside of the rush of summer First Years. Sometimes it happened of course, when adults broke their wands or wished to have secondary wands or other such nonsense. Ollivander complied of course – he was a business man, after all – but he tended to dislike those sorts.

He was fairly surprised to find two people he had never seen before standing just inside the door, one of which was a small child. They were both dark and exceedingly well dressed, and he wondered what in Merlin's name they thought he could do for them.

The man was gazing around the room, seeming to survey every cranny in an odd combination of haughtiness and paranoia. The boy at his side looked straight at Ollivander, despite the shadows and spells that were designed to keep people from noticing him until he'd had a chance to size them up. Staring into the piercing eyes, he was shocked to find heavy barriers around the boy's mind.

He was so startled by the child's compelling gaze that he stepped out of the shadows without making them wait. Those eyes... Where had he seen them before? They were so green as to border on unnatural, and it seemed to Ollivander that they didn't belong in the boy's otherwise dark coloring. Brown or black, yes, not emerald.

Most customers jumped when he appeared, but neither of these two looked in the least surprised. Ollivander was forced to acknowledge the likelihood of the older man having already seen him as well. How curious.

"Hello, what can I do for you?"

"My nephew requires a wand." The man's voice carried a distinctively French accent, making Ollivander twice as curious about what the man thought he wanted.

"Your nephew looks a bit young for a wand," Ollivander returned, blinking owlishly at the little boy. He looked barely seven.

"He requires a wand," the man reiterated forcefully, placing a heavy hand on the boy's shoulder.

The green eyed boy had yet to take his eyes off Ollivander, and it was starting to creep the man out a little. No kid that small should have that sort of intensity, let alone that sort of attention span.

"Are you his guardian and do you have permission from the Ministry?" He tore his eyes away from the boy to focus back on the dark skinned stranger. The man's expression grew slightly dangerous.

"Yes, I am the boy's guardian," he squeezed the boy's shoulder as something seemed to pass between them, leaving Ollivander more curious than ever.

"And do you have permission?" Ollivander pressed. He was entirely unwilling to jeopardize his business for the sake of two French people.

"He is a French citizen," the man stated stonily. "He hardly requires the permission of your government to carry a wand."

"Be that as it may..." Ollivander trailed off, caught once more by those intense green eyes. A flickering candle caught the man's red sleeve and set the boy's eyes glowing for a breath. Ollivander felt as though he had been hit by a ton of bricks. He knew where he'd seen those eyes before.

He tore his gaze away from the boy to scrutinize the man once more. How on earth had this arrogant Frenchman come across a child with Lily Potter's eyes? Could it be? No. But there was always a chance... His eyes flicked up to the boy's forehead, but the view was impeded by a strong glamour.

"Very well," he decided. "I would request that you both swear not to use the wand I sell you inside this country until the boy is of a legal age to do so." After a moment's consideration, the man so swore and the boy followed his lead.

They went through all the wands within three years of the boy's estimated birth. None of them reacted at all, which was odd in itself. Most children elicited bad reactions to poor matches, but there wasn't a murmur from any of the wands to suggest the child was even magical. Ollivander became concerned.

The boy himself had a few odd reactions, and even refused to touch several of the wands. From his estimations, Ollivander had already been fairly certain that those would've been the worst matches, but he'd never seen such a hypersensitive child. How very curious.

Frowning thoughtfully after the boy's fervent refusal to touch his most recent offering, an odd notion tickled the back of Ollivander's mind. What if... And if he was... Well, it couldn't hurt to try.

Muttering calculations under his breath, he disappeared into the back of the shop, rummaging around for that stupid wand. Ever since the Dark Lord had tried to kill the Potter boy, Ollivander had had a little theory about this particular wand. It was an old wand, made the year a boy named Tom Riddle graduated from Hogwarts. A very old wand, and he'd never quite known what to make of it. But ever since that Halloween...

Finding it, he hurried back out to his customers, trying to keep his intense curiosity off his face.

"Here you are," he opened the box and offered its contents to the little boy. "Holly and phoenix feather, 11 inches, supple. Try it."

As soon as he'd opened it up the boy had reared back slightly, eyes going wide. Hesitantly, dark fingers reached out to stroke the pale gleaming wood. Reverently he removed the wand from the box. The world seemed to hold its breath.

With a tiny sigh of pure bliss, the boy curled his hand around the wand. His sigh was echoed by every wand in the store and the faint sound of a phoenix song echoed hauntingly throughout the room.

All three were silent for a moment in appreciation. In all his years, Ollivander had never seen anything like it. It certainly cemented his theory, though. There was no doubt about it, what with those eyes and that particular wand.

To his surprise, the stern faced man who had spent the duration of his time in the shop alternating between arrogance and aggression grinned down at the little boy. He said something in a language Ollivander was unfamiliar with – not French, as he had assumed they would speak – his tone light. The little boy grinned and babbled

back as his uncle bent and kissed the top of his head before turning to look at Ollivander, his face a stern mask once again.

The man handed over a small pouch of galleons before steering his nephew out the door. Just like that, the two had passed into and out of Ollivander's life, just like so many other children and their parents.

Good luck, he thought after them. You'll need it, Harry Potter.

Fast Forward to Elsewhere...

(happening at the canon times)

Quirrel glared venomously at the mirror. Where was the stone? It had to be in there somewhere, but for the life of him he couldn't figure out how to get it out! His head ached, and his Lord was getting angrier and angrier. There was a burning sensation in the back of his head.

With a desperate curse, Quirrel lashed out at the mirror, kicking its frame in frustration. The mirror teetered, then fell, shattering into a thousand pieces, leaving the Dark Lord's host staring down at in mortification.

The Sorcerer's Stone did not appear among the fragments of what was once the most powerful magical mirror in the world. Quirrel had two breaths in which to grasp the enormity of his failure before Lord Voldemort's anger overwhelmed him.

The Dark Lord's spirit fled the room, muttering and hissing angrily at the failure of its most unworthy servant. He would have to find some other way of regaining the life that Potter brat had stolen from him.

Hours later, Dumbledore stared sadly down at the body of the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. It wasn't hard to guess what had happened. Sighing heavily, the Headmaster finished the cremation process, leaving only ashes.

The Dark Lord was moving again. It was only a matter of time... He had to find Harry Potter.

Lucius glared at his French counterpart. He hated it when the other man was right. The wrapped package exchanged hands, and the Malfoy patriarch stalked away, lighter one old diary.

Shay caressed the journal lovingly as he walked away from the blonde. That went well. Much better than he had expected, really. Most likely it was because Malfoy hadn't known exactly what it was he had in his possession. No... Their Lord would not have trusted such information to any of his followers. Only careful research had led the Frenchman to the discovery.

Akshay Lord mal Théa hid the horcrux deep within his manor where his sister's sphinx prowled unchecked. When Gabriel grew to maturity, Shay smirked, they would be ready. His nephew, the Boy-Who-Lived. His nephew who would bring down the Dark Lord. His wonderful nephew who would help Akshay Lord mal Théa rise and fill the void.

Remus stared sadly at the upturned faces of the third years. Harry should be here. Harry should be in this class, sitting with his Gryffindor friends. Instead, the boy he had long thought of as his honorary godson was missing, and rumored to be dead.

He couldn't believe that, though. Dumbledore certainly didn't. Harry was alive... Somewhere. They just had to find him – preferably before Sirius Black could.

Sirius's grin was strained as the Minister publicly apologized for thirteen years of wrongful imprisonment. Whoever coined the saying "dead men tell no tales" obviously hadn't been introduced to the Wizarding World, as Peter's corpse had done a very good job at clearing his ex-friend's name.

Sirius was compensated for his years in Azkaban and was even awarded the Order of Merlin, third class. He was somewhat less than impressed.

As Moony led him out of the ministry, he couldn't help asking – yet again – where his godson was. The tightlipped silence was beginning to wear thin.

"He's gone," Moony finally admitted as they stepped into the Black House. "He's been missing for years, Sirius."

For the first time since his escape, Sirius Black wept.

The Triwizard Tournament went off without a hitch. Cedric Diggory waved the Cup proudly to the cheers of everyone present. Even the students from the other schools clapped raucously. The last Task had been exhilarating to watch, as the three champions had raced toward the center of the maze.

In the end, Fleur Delacour had almost won. Had it not been for Krum tackling her from behind, she would've made it first. In their subsequent struggle, however, Diggory had managed to snatch the Cup from under their noses. It had been an incredibly close race.

Over the summer, the three schools agreed on a mutually beneficial exchange program. Select Fourth and Sixth years would have the option of attending a sister school for the year. Terms were agreed upon and the exchange started that September.

The first guests to Hogwarts were Fourth Years Ivan Kholodov and Dominique Delrose, and Sixth Years Nadezhda Bykovsky and Jean-Pierre Fourcade. They were Sorted into Houses for the duration of their stay, learning and teaching their cultures and ideas. After the success of the first exchange, students began competing for the honor of representing their school.

For the second year, Hogwarts sent Daniel Chambers and Susan Bones to Beauxbatons and Romilda Vane and Theodore Nott to Durmstrang. In return, the students of Hogwarts were joined by Fourth Years Nicolai Mozarov and Melisande Rousseau, and Sixth Years Anya Rzaeva and Gabriel mal Théa.

A/N: One thing I want to make very clear from the get go, as I have a feeling the waters might get a bit muddy in this and later chapters: this is not Harry/Hermione. It is also not a Harry/Ginny fic.

"(French)"

Chapter Six: that mal Théa

Hermione laughed as Neville tripped on the hem of his over-long robe, catching her friend before he could fall.

"Thanks," he grinned at her, embarrassed blush almost unnoticeable. "Gran insisted on leaving enough room to grow," he explained good-naturedly as they made their way over to the Gryffindor table.

"Couldn't you just leave enough fabric in the hem so that it could be let out as you grow?" Hermione pointed out, pragmatic as ever. Neville just shrugged. He could no more explain the workings of his grandmother's mind than Hermione could her own parents'.

They settled down in their usual spots, where they were quickly joined by Ginny, who gave them both big hugs before she sat down.

"Sorry I didn't find you on the train," she apologized cheerfully. "Ron, Dean and Seamus tied me up and stuffed me in the closet to witness horrors too horrifyingly horrible to name."

Her friends laughed with her, waving off her apology as they eagerly set to the task of catching up since their last letters. Soon they were joined by Ginny's brother and his two best friends. Amiable insults were exchanged as the two groups merged into one slightly less cohesive group. The two trios tended to band together at meals and during school-wide events and activities, but otherwise preferred to keep their distance and the peace.

Ron had been actively pursuing Hermione since the end of the previous year, despite having been horrible to her throughout their first year at school. Hermione, on the other hand, preferred to have little to do with the boy she still considered arrogant and immature. All four of the boys got along well, but shy, quiet Neville was often left out more or less by accident by his rambunctious dorm mates. Ginny, a tomboy at heart, got along great with the boys, but hated

the feeling of tagging around after her brother almost as much as she disliked hanging around with the other Gryffindors from her year.

As they all settled down to await the Sorting, conversation predictably turned toward this year's exchange students. As most of their group was now in Sixth year, they were even more excited than last year.

"Do you think we'll get one in our dorm?" Dean asked, eyeing the closed doors speculatively.

"Maybe," Seamus grinned. "But I would rather there be some really hot new girls!" His two best friends grinned back, though Ron shot Hermione a slightly mournful stare which she tried to ignore.

"If Ginny and I started gushing about cute foreign boys, you would all start making faces," she griped. "And yet there you sit! I would like to have one of the new students staying in the dorm with us, though. It would be ever so interesting!"

It was the boys' turn to roll their eyes, though Neville agreed that it would be kind of neat. Before anyone else could say anything, the doors to the Great Hall swung open and the assembled students fell silent.

In marched McGonagall, straight backed and stiff as ever. At her back, like a row of bewildered ducklings, the new Firsties scurried to match her quick pace. Several craned their necks to get a view of the ceiling while others stared at the older students with wide eyes.

The Sorting went quickly, though it seemed to drag on forever for those anxiously awaiting the second act – the exchange students. Hermione's group joined Gryffindor table in applauding all the new students, cheering raucously for those Sorted into their House and participating in a slightly hostile silence for the newly Sorted Slytherins.

Finally the last First Year was sent to Hufflepuff, and Dumbledore stood up. The hall fell silent, anticipation thick enough you could taste it.

"Welcome to another year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry," began the old man. "It is my pleasure to once again

welcome all of our new and returning students." As always, he cast a strange, sad little glance toward Hermione and Ron's group at the Gryffindor table.

Hermione was never quite sure why he did it – or even if anyone else noticed that he did. Every year, without fail, he looked straight at the largest concentration of Hermione's year mates at Gryffindor table. Always, always he had that sad look, as though he were mourning a great loss.

After three years of it, determining that it was pattern rather than coincidence, she tried to research an answer. She tentatively decided it was the loss of the Boy Who Lived that earned his sad stares – which was somewhat odd to her, as rumor had it that Dumbledore himself had placed the boy at a different, undisclosed location for safety.

But the Headmaster had continued talking. In fact, he had finished talking, and was gesturing toward the doors, which once again swung open. It was a small group that entered this time. Two boys, two girls. As they began the long walk toward the platform, Hermione began the task of analyzing them as the hall burst into a buzz of speculation.

The Durmstrang students walked in first.

The boy was tall for his age; Hermione estimated around 5'9". He wore red robes with brown fur trim. He was straight and lean and very blonde. He had a strong profile with an aquiline nose and a thick, square jaw. Blue eyes flashed with curiosity as he glanced around the room. It seemed to take a supreme amount of effort to keep his eyes forward, and his lips kept twitching as he caught sight of different things.

Hermione judged him to be the younger of the two, and thus the Fourth Year. She also judged him to be inclined to smiles and curiosity. His face betrayed him. His body also seemed inclined to betray him, though in a different way. He still had that adolescent looseness to his joints that made young boys seem all elbows and knees. She liked him already.

The girl on his arm, however, gave Hermione a pause. She was of average height, 5'6" or 5'7". Like the boy, she had a strong profile,

though her coloring was darker. Dark eyes, dark hair, dark expression... She seemed to radiate aloofness, with a trace of scorn. Hermione swore she could smell the scent of Dark Magic clinging to the girl's trailing skirts.

Slytherin, Hermione decided with a slight shudder. Perhaps Ravenclaw, but definitely not someone she would be sharing a dorm room with. She was admittedly relieved. The girl wore an old fashioned, high necked gown in a dark neutral brown. Compared to her companion's brilliant scarlet robes and innocence, she seemed Gothic and sinister.

The Beauxbaton students followed, also linked at the elbow.

This girl was definitely the younger of the pair. Her bright purple robes, golden brown hair and sunny smile made her jump out as much as the Durmstrang boy. Bright brown eyes peeked from beneath her thick eyelashes, and Hermione was certain that most of the boys in the room were watching her.

She was the shortest of them all, though not by much. She was curvaceous, bright, and seemed to scream Hufflepuff. The hand not tucked into her companion's elbow was artistically angled to accentuate her grace and figure. Hermione dismissed her without further thought.

The fourth student, however, grabbed her attention. He was tall, pushing six feet. Everything about him was elegant. His skin was the golden brown of someone with Middle Eastern blood. His hair was a little longer than his shoulders, black and curly, held back from his face in a loose horsetail. He was lean and muscular, radiating a calm self-assuredness that seemed to scream 'mess with me if you dare!'

Another Slytherin, Hermione groaned mentally. The one House in which she could not approach the exchange students. What luck.

Instead of robes, he wore an undecorated military-style uniform, though Hermione couldn't place what military it belonged to. His chin was tilted arrogantly upwards, and he was the only one of the four who did not look around at all. Held loosely in his left hand was an elegant black and silver cane that thunked aggressively down onto the stone floor with the boy's every step.

By the time the four joined Dumbledore at the head of the room, everyone was silent. Hermione spared a quick glance to take in the rest of the student population, and was somewhat disturbed to see how focused the Slytherins seemed on the boy with the cane. It was a bit too intense to explain away with a 'kindred soul' theory, especially as they seemed to barely notice the Durmstrang girl, whom Hermione felt was the more malevolent of the two, though perhaps the less dangerous.

"It is my pleasure to introduce our newest students to you." The Headmaster appeared serenely unaffected by all the stares.

"From Durmstrang, I would like to present Fourth Year Nicolai Ivanovich Mozarov and Sixth Year Anya Alexandrovna Rzaeva." The blond boy bowed slightly, and the severe girl inclined her head slightly in acknowledgement. The students of Hogwarts applauded vigorously in excitement.

"From Beauxbaton, it is my pleasure to introduce Fourth Year Melisande Rousseau," the pretty girl dropped an elegant courtesy at the applause. "And Sixth Year Gabriel mal Théa." This announcement was met with scattered applause that quickly gave way to a heavy silence. Mal Théa seemed amused by the reaction, and responded by giving his chin an even more aggressive upward tilt. The silence held, then gave way to furious whispers.

The only table to remain silent, Hermione noted uneasily, was the Slytherin table. They were focused on the dark young man, their eyes devouring him. When he finally looked over and gave their table a tiny nod, they all seemed to sit up straighter. Hermione would swear they were nearly glowing. Was that... respect? hunger? Or something else? She turned far more wary eyes on mal Théa.

"Oh wow," Neville breathed, eyes round as he stared up at the French boy.

"What is it?" Hermione asked, as the rest of the group leaned in toward the Sixth Year, all anxious to be let in on the apparently very public secret of the new boy's identity.

Neville tore his eyes away from mal Théa to give the others a surprised look. "You don't know?" Hermione gave him a Look that

said quite clearly that she wouldn't be asking if she already knew the answer. "Oh, right. Muggleborn," he muttered under his breath, though he still gave the Weasley siblings an odd look.

"Well, that," he nodded toward the dark boy, "is Gabriel mal Théa, nephew and protégée of Akshay mal Théa." The Weasleys both gained expressions of dawning horror, while the other three continued to look blank. Neville gave them a forced smile.

"Well, it's never been proven, but... Ever hear of the Parisian Butcher?" he inquired tightly. At Hermione's tentative nod, he jerked his chin toward mal Théa again. "His mentor, uncle, and military superior." Hermione's eyes got very round.

The Parisian Butcher was well known in both worlds. A so-called renegade military general, the Butcher was a force to be reckoned with. His private army was something of an urban legend, a magical mercenary force that practically ran the southern part of France.

The General had earned his macabre nickname through his ruthless actions over the years. Three massacres from the past decade were known to be his work, and he didn't seem to care who got in his way when it came to achieving his goals. That, coupled with the fact that he was French, had given the media a creative handle on the man.

"How could Dumbledore let someone like that into Hogwarts?" Ginny frowned.

"Slytherin snake," Ron glowered, the fire of rivalry lighting up in his eyes.

Further conversation was cut off as Dumbledore calmly raised his hands for silence, before inviting Mozarov to don the Sorting Hat. The blond boy sat down on the stool with palpable curiosity.

Hufflepuff, Hermione decided. Or possibly Gryffindor...

"Hufflepuff!" cried the Sorting Hat after a few moments. The boy stood, smiling slightly as he joined the cheering table.

Rzaeva took the seat next, back ramrod straight as she reluctantly placed the Hat on her head. This time the Hat took a bit longer in its decision.

Ravenclaw or Slytherin, Hermione predicted.

"Ravenclaw!" the Sorting Hat finally settled on. Hermione smirked slightly as the Ravenclaw table began cheering and everyone else clapped politely. Annya Rzaev joined her new Housemates, still looking faintly too sinister for her companions.

Rousseau was next, and she took the stool gracefully, a shy smile given to the room before the Hat covered her.

Hufflepuff, Hermione thought dismissively.

"SLYTHERIN!" the Hat cried immediately. There was a moment of surprised silence before the Slytherins began clapping. Rousseau gave another dazzling smile as she hopped off the stool and sauntered over to the green and silver table. Surprise, surprise! She made a mental note to watch out for the French girl.

Mal Théa took the stool next, his cane resting across his knees as he settled down. She wondered briefly what made a sixteen year old boy decide to carry a decorative cane before she turned to speculating on which House he would get Sorted into.

Slytherin, she decided. Although there would be a nice symmetry to it all if he got into Gryffindor... Completely unrealistic, though. Honestly, if he were in Gryffindor, she probably wouldn't be able to sleep at night – not to mention poor Neville. Slytherin, her mind reaffirmed.

Brie stepped out of the carriage and looked up at the school with bored curiosity. For all the legends about its beauty and strength, the teen was somewhat disappointed.

Turning back to the thestral-drawn carriage, Brie carefully helped his female companion down. Rousseau nodded her thanks as she straightened her skirts. She too looked around, but apparently found something in the castle that he couldn't see. Shooting a smile at him, she once again attempted to draw him into a conversation.

"(So what do you think of it, mal Théa?)"

"(The fortifications are weak on the east side,)" He replied immediately, scrutinizing the building. "(And the wards around the towers haven't been renewed as often as those around the lower levels of the castle. A determined attacker could get in through the wards over by the south tower, then enter the actual castle on the northeast side.)"

Rousseau huffed, tossing her head. "(You're hopeless, mal Théa,)" she informed him, obviously put out.

"(Thank you, Rousseau,)" he replied blandly, standing just short of a parade rest as he turned his attention back to his new surroundings. He continued his analysis of the castle internally, as Rousseau obviously wasn't interested.

Melisande Rousseau rolled her eyes skyward, as if praying for patience. "(Well, let's go, then,)" she urged.

He offered his elbow automatically, and she took it graciously.

"(Do you think they've waited dinner on us?)" she asked, slightly wistful.

"(Shiva,)" Brie muttered, "(I hope not!)"

"(Oh, don't be a spoil sport,)" Rousseau bumped her shoulder into him gently, chidingly. "(It'll be fun!)"

Brie's silence spoke volumes.

They were met at the door by a well-groomed middle aged woman who introduced herself as Professor Sinistra, Astronomy. She led them into a small side room where they met the Durmstrang students. Excusing herself graciously, she told them someone would be along shortly to let them know when they were to be announced.

As soon as she was gone, Melisande turned to the others with a calculated bright smile. Inwardly Brie had to wince – she could be such a manipulative bitch sometimes. At least he knew her true colors. He almost felt sorry for the surprise everyone else had in store. The "sweet innocent" wasn't sweet or innocent. At all.

The two Fourth Years began talking almost immediately. Nicolai had seemed happy to get away from the severe Anya, and was being expertly pumped for information by his French counterpart.

Brie turned to Anya, giving her a grave nod. "Mademoiselle Rzaeva," he acknowledged, his eyes boring into hers. She looked somewhat intrigued as she gave him a brief curtsy.

"Lord mal Théa," she responded politely. He gave her the ghost of a smile.

"Thank you, but the title is erroneous. Call me Gabriel."

She gave him a slightly surprised look, a shade more interest in her eyes. "And you may call me Anya," she reciprocated the honor. He gave her a more formal bow to acknowledge that he understood what she had offered him.

"So, Gabriel, what do you think of Hogwarts?"

"I am withholding judgment," he responded wryly, giving the surrounding room a jaundiced look and winning a dry smile from his new companion. "And yourself? What do you think of Hogwarts, Miss Anya?"

"It is big," she responded after a moment. "And it is depressingly cheerful."

Brie's eyes laughed in response, though his expression remained severe. "Yes, I can see how that might pose a problem." She smirked and was about to respond when a ghost wafted into the room with a summons to the Great Hall for their introduction.

"I hate drama," mumbled Anya as she accepted Nicolai's offered elbow. Privately Brie agreed completely, though he said nothing as he offered his arm to Rousseau, who looked altogether thrilled at the chance to be the center of attention.

Here goes nothing, Brie thought as he stepped through the doors.

The walk up the aisle was far too long for his tastes, and it took a supreme amount of willpower to keep his eyes focused forward. On

his arm, Melisande preened and postured, garnering attention. Personally, Brie preferred the attention to be on her.

When they reached the front of the room he suffered ungladly through the Headmaster's speech and introduction. When his name was called he lifted his chin slightly in challenge. He was mal Théa.

The table decorated predominantly in green and silver seemed to be intensely focused on him, and he identified them as the Slytherins from Cousin Levi's letters. He gave them a barely perceptible nod, and sarcastically wondered if an entire table of students could swoon. He would worry about what they wanted from him later.

Next he sought out Levi, sitting at the Ravenclaw table. The third year smiled and waved.

Their brief Sorting began, proceeding exactly as Levi had told him it would. Mozarov joined the Hufflepuffs, Anya joined Levi at the Ravenclaw table, and, predictably, Rousseau joined the ranks of Slytherin.

He stepped forward as his name was called, cane hitting the ground with a reassuring thunk. Somewhat curious about what would happen, he let the Hat slip down over his eyes.

Well, well, what have we here? Gabriel Reuben-Amrit... Lieutenant General! Hmmm... Military Academy, field experience – certainly no lack of brains or brawn. Brie could feel the Hat sorting through his mind as though it was a giant filing cabinet.

The Hat continued to exclaim over a few things, then suddenly went quiet. Harry Potter? It asked, hesitant and slightly taken aback. Dear Merlin... The feeling of being mind-raped intensified, and it took every shred of Brie's will to keep from having a breakdown in front of his entire school. Instead, he settled for a purely mental breakdown, in which he began systematically turning off portions of his brain, trying to drive the Hat's presence away.

Alarmed, the Hat retreated to the very edge of Brie's conscience, and he relaxed ever so slightly.

I'm sorry, Mr. mal Théa, the Hat said diffidently as it waited for him to recover from his overly-successful defensive maneuver. He didn't reply, instead waiting for the Hat to give him the verdict.

Well, as I said, you are brave and intelligent – though your intelligence seems extremely focused, the Hat mused. Very strategically minded – no, Ravenclaw is not a proper place for you. Loyalty in abundance, but it is all for your adopted – excuse me – for your family. You would slaughter the Hufflepuffs. The Hat did not sound as though it were joking.

So. Slytherin or Gryffindor. You are cunning and ambitious – very ambitious! Do you really plan to... Well, that's a discussion for another day, I suppose. You have the mind and the lineage of a Slytherin. But you have the heart and the courage of a Gryffindor.

I could be persuaded either way, young man. Have you a preference? Brie thought for a moment. Did he? Suddenly a tiny, evil little thought crept into his mind.

Put me where I will cause the most chaos, he instructed the Hat. He could've sworn he heard the thing laugh.

Good luck, Lieutenant General Gabriel Reuben-Amrit mal Théa. Harry James Potter. May you find everything you seek. I will throw you to...

"(Speaking French!)"

Chapter Seven: Sweating Bullets

"Gryffindor?" Hermione mouthed in horror. The room was silent as mal Théa swept the Sorting Hat off his head and placed it on the stool. He walked over to the red and gold table at a deliberately slow pace. The sound of his cane hitting the floor rang loudly in the dead stillness.

Surprisingly, it was the Slytherins who began the applause. By the time mal Théa reached the table, the Gryffindors – not to be outdone by their rivals – were giving him an enthusiastic standing ovation.

He appeared to completely ignore everyone as he walked down their table to its midpoint. Hermione gulped slightly as cold green eyes met her curious gaze.

"Is this spot taken?" mal Théa inquired, his words somehow cutting through the uproar without any discernable effort or increase of volume.

"N-no," she stuttered, eyes wide as he sat down to her left. Seamus quickly scooted over to leave the newcomer plenty of elbow room, and across the table Neville was imitating a deer caught in headlights.

The cheering died and with a few last words, Dumbledore dismissed them to the task of consuming very large quantities of food. Around them, conversation immediately picked up. For the six – now seven – there was a strange pocket of silence. Mal Théa seemed unconcerned by the stares of his new housemates, proceeding to methodically dish up his plate.

"Um," said Ron, staring as the French boy removed a platter of roast meat from the redhead's hands. It was an action that would've gotten anyone else a very colorful explosion, but this time Ron just swallowed and served himself something else.

It was Neville who surprised them by asserting himself.

"Gabriel mal Théa," he bobbed his head in a close imitation of the half bows that the exchange students seemed so well-practiced in.

"It's a... a pleasure to see you again." His friends shot him sharp, inquiring glances, but he kept his gaze focused on the boy across the table. He was pale and his hands were shaking slightly as mal Théa looked up from his plate.

"Monsieur Longbottom." Neville visibly drooped with relief when mal Théa looked away. "It has been a while."

"Yeah," Neville agreed weakly. "Uh, how've you been?"

There was a pause as mal Théa took a bite of his steak and chewed it slowly. "Bien, merci. Et vous?" He seemed completely uninterested in the reply – it was fairly obvious that he was just going through the motions of polite conversation. Hermione wondered if he realized he had slipped into French.

"Um, I've been well. Thanks." There was another pause, this one slightly more awkward. "And your... your family?"

Green eyes flicked upwards once again, and a blush spread across Neville's face.

"They have been well. My niece is beginning to talk." Hermione swore there was warmth in the boy's voice, but his profile and overall demeanor remained cold and aloof.

"Wow," Neville blinked. "Isn't she still a bit young?"

"Precocious," mal Théa dismissed pointedly.

Neville grimaced, but didn't comment. By this time Hermione was ready to die from curiosity. Their other companions seemed to feel the same way, as Ginny leaned forward to peer around Hermione.

"How do you two know each other?" the redhead inquired lightly, shooting Neville a funny look.

"Um, the normal functions," Neville was sweating slightly under the intense stares. "Gabriel's family always comes to Grandma's summer soiree. Ms Rai worked with Gran years ago."

Hermione's eyebrow shot up. They were on a first name basis? Why had he never thought to mention that he was friends with the Parisian Butcher's favorite nephew?

To be fair, she noted, it never came up. He's the only one with Pureblood Traditionalist ties. He probably knows a lot of famous - and infamous - people in passing. His Gran's soiree is an important annual social event, according to Parvati. Besides, calling those two friends was a gross exaggeration, and Hermione knew it. Poor Neville was sweating bullets.

Mal Théa seemed to give Neville some sort of look, because the boy jumped guiltily. "Oh, right. Gabriel, this is Ginevra Weasley, Hermione Granger, Seamus Finnigan, Dean Thomas, and Ronald Weasley." He didn't bother restating mal Théa's name.

Mal Théa gave them all a vague nod of acknowledgement before standing. "Pardon," he gave a brief smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I believe I will retire for the night." Without another word, he turned and stalked toward a side door where a small Ravenclaw boy hovered.

Immediately, the Gryffindors crowded around Neville.

"What on earth just happened?" Ginny jumped straight in, staring after the dark new Gryffindor with wide eyes.

"That was Gabriel mal Théa being sociable," Neville responded, lips drawn tight as he rubbed his temple.

"Sociable?" Hermione gaped. "That was being sociable?"

"His goodbye was the longest thing he said!" exclaimed Dean, sounding perturbed. As an un-studious Muggleborn, he had even less idea of what was going on than Hermione.

"I want to know what was up with that damn cane," Ron griped, looking petulantly at the steak platter mal Théa had stolen from him at the beginning of dinner.

"Are we really expected to share a dorm with... that?" Seamus sounded as though this hadn't quite sunk in yet. Nor did it sound as though he much wanted it to.

"Never mind that - look at the Slytherins!" Ginny jerked her chin toward the table across the room, scowling in that general direction. "They're all looking hot and bothered. A Galleon says he has a snake posse by breakfast."

"Let's go up to the common room," Neville urged, looking around unhappily. "Everyone is staring at us."

As soon as they were outside the Great Hall and the door was shut behind them, Brie was enveloped in a tight hug. Laughing lightly he returned the squeeze, rubbing Levi's shoulders companionably.

"(Alright, kiddo?)"

"(Of course. It's great to see you again, Brie! It gets really lonely around here without family...)" Levi gave him one of his rare, blinding smiles, and Brie ruffled the boy's dark curls with an answering grin.

"(Course it does.)" Leaving one arm draped around the shoulders of his shorter cousin, Brie set them to walking again. "(You'll have to give me the grand tour this weekend. I have those maps you made, but you know me -)"

"(Always know the enemy's territory better than your own,)" Levi recited with him, shaking his head slightly. "(You and our Lord Uncle are both insane,)" he said dryly, leading the way at a sedate pace in deference to Brie's discernable limp. Away from prying eyes, in the company of family, Brie allowed himself this little weakness.

"(Of course we are,)" Brie replied genially, squeezing his little cousin's shoulder. "(Comes with the territory. Scrambled eggs for brains, or so Fae tells me.)"

"(How is Fae, by the way?)" Levi inquired, peering anxiously up at Brie with his heavy-lidded amber eyes.

"(She's fine. Extremely unhappy with Uncle Shay, at the moment – she was looking forward to going to school together for the next two years. Sent a letter for you, actually.)" Levi perked up immediately. "(It's with my luggage. I'll give it to you tomorrow morning.)"

"(Alright,)" Levi nodded agreeably. "(How're your legs?)" Brie winced slightly, but didn't even attempt to pretend nothing was wrong.

"(Painful, as usual. I got another stress fracture on the left,)" he sighed, glaring slightly at his rebellious limbs.

Levi winced sympathetically, but didn't ask how. The answer was always some variation on the theme of 'well, I was training and...'. There was a moment of companionable silence as they walked before Brie broke it with a sudden thought.

"(Where's Val? I thought he was planning to join us here!)"

"(Couldn't make it,)" Levi sighed, skirting around a suit of armor that had decided to patrol the hall. "(Mozarov's family played a political favor to get him here, and you know Uncle Mauri doesn't hold with that sort of thing.)"

Brie snorted at the mention of their Uncle. Maurice mal Théa was actually Brie's great uncle and Levi's great great uncle. Uncle Mauri was the Head of Law Enforcement back in France. He had risen quickly through the ranks of the French Aurors entirely on his own merit. Even well into his 70s, the man was the best there was in his field – his only major shortcoming was his refusal to deal with matters concerning his own family. The Parisian Butcher was not off limits, per se, but the pursuit was definitely not active.

"(Uncle Mauri needs to wake up and move with the times,)" Brie griped. "(He and Grandfather are both painfully old fashioned!)"

"(Not that you mind when it comes to turning a blind eye on our Lord Uncle,)" Levi teased, causing Brie to grin down at him sheepishly. "(Well!)" he continued before Brie could respond. "(This is where we part. Go up that staircase and take a left. A second staircase should take you to a portrait of a fat woman dressed in pink. She'll ask for the password. Good luck.)"

"(What, you aren't going to tell me the password?)" Brie gave him a vaguely hurt look, though a mischievous glint lurked in bright green eyes.

Levi rolled his eyes. "(Coz, you proved you didn't need passwords years ago. I don't think I need to worry about you.)"

"(Right,)" laughed Brie, giving his little cousin a bear hug. Levi grunted as his whippet thin scholar's body was squeezed by militarily fit Gabriel. Within seconds, Levi tapped out of the hug, and laughing, Brie set him down.

"(I'll see you tomorrow, little coz,)" Brie waved. Levi just waved a hand in acknowledgement as he tried to catch his breath.

Cane tapping a cheerful beat on the floor, Brie took off up the stairs. Stopping at the first landing, he took a few moments to relax his face into the aloof distance that was expected of him as a mal Théa. When he was ready, he headed the rest of the way up. It was time to deal with his new Housemates.

"Alright Neville, give," Ginny demanded as soon as they were all settled. They had been joined by Parvati and Lavender, who expressed a right to be there by virtue of being Sixth Years. Several others hovered at the edges of the circle but didn't intrude.

"Er... Give what?" Neville looked around nervously from where he sat effectively trapped between Ron and Hermione. He got an elbow from Ron in reply. "Ouch!"

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Tell us more about mal Théa!"

"What do you want to know?" Neville wilted slightly, eyes flickering around the circle.

Hermione pursed her lips as she thought over the brief dinner conversation, as well as the oddities of mal Théa's appearance. "I thought he was French," she finally began, "but he looked Middle Eastern."

"Indian," corrected Parvati. She blushed when everyone turned to look at her. "Not Middle Eastern," she muttered defensively.

"She's right," said Neville. "The mal Théas are really into the idea of strong international ties. They tend to marry outside the country frequently, which is why they don't have to worry about family size and genetics – which in turn makes them highly desirable in marriage for other purebloods who lack that genetic variety."

Hermione was nodding along in interested agreement – she'd wondered about pureblood marriage – though she was seeing Neville in a new light. She knew he was smarter than he often appeared. She also knew that he was culturally immersed in the Wizarding World. She was angry with herself for never bothering to find out precisely what that entailed until now.

"Guillaume mal Théa, Gabriel's grandfather, married an Indian woman. Guillaume's younger brother married a Russian sorceress, and his older sister married into the German aristocracy."

Neville was receiving acknowledging nods, though the other boys seemed predominantly bored with the direction the topic was headed.

"Anyway," Neville hurried on, "Gabriel's mum is Guillaume's youngest daughter."

"Wait," Hermione interjected with a frown. "If Gabriel's mother is related to the mal Théas, why don't they use his father's last name?"

"Er," Neville looked slightly uncomfortable. "Bit of a scandal, that," he looked over their heads in his quest to avoid eye contact.

"Well?" prodded Lavender, obviously eager to hear gossip, even if it was old.

"After Ms Rai – that's Sarai mal Théa – graduated, she got a Potions Mastery and taught for a year. She almost killed a student, though, and gave up teaching the subject on the principle that the students were all blithering idiots."

"Wish Snape would give it up," mumbled Seamus at the same time that Parvati and Lavender gasped dramatically.

"You mean she was fired?" Ginny asked, casting a slightly exasperated look at the two older girls.

"Not really," Neville shrugged. "But she ran off to America with a friend. Um, this is where things get a bit muddy. See, she drops off the face of the earth for two years, then resurfaces with a husband and starts teaching Muggle Studies. Somewhere along the lines she

has a daughter and loses the husband – no one ever quite figured out the order."

Hermione blinked. Well, that was certainly an odd life story for a privileged pureblood. Running off to America to teach Muggle Studies?

"I wonder what happened to the husband," Hermione mused, not really expecting an answer. Neville shrugged. If there was an 'official story,' he must not know it.

"Maybe he ran away with another woman!" Lavender suggested.

"Or maybe he caught her cheating on him!" Parvati grinned.

"Or maybe she murdered him in his sleep!" Ron said mockingly.

Hermione ignored the speculation in favor of doing some mental math. "Where does that leave our mal Théa?"

"Um... See, that's what no one knows. He's obviously a mal Théa, and he's obviously Ms Rai's son, but no one even heard that he existed until he was eleven." Neville shrugged uncomfortably. "I'd prefer not to speculate, though. He's scary."

"Why thank you," murmured a cold voice from directly behind him.

Chapter Eight: Challenge

Neville squeaked, whirling around so fast that he nearly fell off the couch. The rest of the group stared wide eyed at the dark young man who had seemingly appeared out of nowhere.

"Erm, Gabriel! Hi!" Neville scrambled to his feet, staring up at the French teenager. "Um..."

"How did you get in without the password?" Dean inquired, saving Neville from dissolving into a stuttering pile of nerves.

Hermione got the impression that if he hadn't felt himself above it, mal Théa would've shrugged. Instead, he arched an eyebrow in a look that clearly informed them that he wouldn't divulge any secrets. Not that she blamed him too much – he had just walked in on them gossiping about his family. She would make sure the Headmaster knew about the incident though.

"I will not keep you from your...enlightening conversation. Bonsoir." He turned away and walked up the dormitory step, ignoring the stares of his new Housemates. When he had completely disappeared, the group turned back to Neville. Neville sat down slowly, staring at the fire.

"I can't believe it," he muttered. "I'm still alive!" He ran his hand through his hair and down across his chest as if double checking to make sure he hadn't received any mortal wounds from the encounter.

Seamus made a face. "I don't wanna share a room with that freak," he whined.

"How long do you think before it's safe to go up there?" Dean threw an uneasy glance in the direction of their dorm.

"stupid cane," muttered Ron with a scowl.

"Neville," began Hermione slowly, frowning at the boys.

"No," he said.

"Pardon?"

"No," he repeated. "I don't want to talk about mal Théa anymore. He's going to make me suffer enough as it is. I am not digging myself in deeper to satisfy your curiosity."

Hermione stared at him, stumped. She'd known Neville for going on six years, and he'd never stood in the way of her curiosity.

"What do you mean?" asked Ginny. "I thought he was just going to ignore it! I mean, didn't he just walk away and tell us to enjoy ourselves?"

"It's Gabriel," said Neville, as though this ought to explain everything to everyone. "If I say one more thing that might possibly be considered slanderous about his family, he'll... he'll... I don't know. And I don't want to know! Leave me alone!"

"But he'd never know the difference!" Ron pointed out. "Don't be such a baby."

"Don't be naïve, Ron," Neville snapped back, causing everyone to lean back slightly. Mild-mannered Neville was beginning to act out of character. Hermione's mind leapt to provide the metaphor of a cornered, wounded animal.

"We are talking about Lieutenant General Gabriel mal Théa!"

"Yeah! Exactly! Just some dude who happens to have gained a title because he has an insane Dark Wizard for an uncle. He isn't omniscient or anything," Ron pointed out.

Neville just shook his head mournfully, rubbing his arm. "You know what, think whatever you want, Ron. I don't care. Just don't expect me to sacrifice myself on the altar of Gryfindor curiosity."

With that said, Neville stood up and turned toward their dorm. "I'm going to bed," he announced, his tone indicating that he assumed he was marching to his death. "If you hear loud screams, please inform my Gran that I died with honor."

"Sure thing," Dean offered with a little wave.

Brie smiled to himself as he rearranged the trunks to put himself closest to the door. The setup wasn't half bad, though he still wasn't overly fond of the idea of sharing living space with four teenage boys. He was used to rooming with others, but somehow he doubted this would be much like staying in the barracks.

The next step was to place defenses around his bed. He loaded the curtains with as many repellants and charms as he could remember, saturating them until he could almost smell the magic.

A dream catcher was hung discreetly at the head of his bed. Ami had made it for him when he was first sent away. She had strong Native American blood through her father, and she had woven a deep Protected Sleep spell into the circle. It was one of his most cherished possessions. It allowed him to sleep dreamlessly at night, but still be able to wake instantly if necessary. Of course, it was also something his beloved sister had hand-made for him "with love," so its emotional value was incalculable.

A Muggle gun was slipped under his pillow. Like the dream catcher, the gun had extra emotional value. It had been one of the first Christmas presents he had ever received, a gift from Uncle Shay. It was nearly a decade old now, but he kept it in perfect condition.

Another more recent gift from Shay was a small leather-bound book. Machiavelli's "The Prince" was one of Brie's two textbooks on life. The other, Sun Tzu's "Art of War," had been given to him by his first drill sergeant when he was much younger. Both were extremely important to the teen and they were placed in his headboard with loving care.

His trunk was already heavily spelled, so he didn't bother securing it beyond a simple locking charm to keep it from being moved. His brooms were placed under the bed and were also locked into place. Satisfied with his setup, he began getting ready for bed.

His cane joined the brooms under his bed, quickly followed by his shoes. He pulled off his uniform shirt and folded it carefully, ignoring the network of suddenly visible scars. One thing he hated about sharing his room with other people was that even in sleep, he needed to wear long sleeves and high necks. It was extremely irritating.

He traded his uniform pants for sleepwear, careful not to catch the fabric against the briefly exposed metal brace that currently encased his left leg. He didn't even bother to glare at it anymore, preferring to ignore it. Briefly he considered taking it off, but decided that he would rather not face the possible consequences.

Stupid ritual, he griped mentally. It was tradition to gripe whenever he was forced to don one or both of the stupid braces. He was careful not to start thinking about the reason he'd gone through the ritual in the first place. Even now, years later, panic attacks snuck up on him if he wasn't careful. Honestly, he'd prefer to avoid having one around his new schoolmates.

Grabbing his case of toiletries, he made his way toward the bathroom, mentally reviewing his new housemates. Locking the door – he didn't care that the bathroom was meant to be shared; the other boys could wait for him to finish – he began his nightly ablutions.

Neville Longbottom, his mental review began. He and Neville had been introduced when they were 11 – it was the evening Brie had been Introduced to Society, and the Longbottom boy had been eager to meet someone his own age at a social function who didn't belong to the Malfoy Squad. He'd been somewhat intimidated by Brie's brooding silences and coldness, but had approached him nonetheless.

Seeing Neville sitting at the Gryffindor Table, Brie had been reminded of one of their earliest conversations, before he had frightened the other boy away. He couldn't remember how the topic had come up, but they had spoken of their parents. Brie had felt an odd kinship toward the boy whose parents couldn't recognize him. That night he had confided to Longbottom that he considered his uncle to be his father, and had alluded to his panic attacks. He had wondered if it were possible to become friends with someone not related to you.

They had exchanged a few vague letters, not saying much beyond the normal social niceties. Still, Brie had looked forward to them.

The next time they saw each other, nearly a year had passed. Neville, excited to see him, had run up behind him and put a hand on his shoulder. Reacting on instinct, Brie had broken the boy's arm

in three places before he had registered who it was. That was the end of their budding friendship.

From the way the other boy reacted to Brie joining him for dinner, Brie figured that the incident still hadn't been forgotten. It didn't really bother the Frenchman, though. After all, his cousins were the only friends he would ever need, and his brothers in arms were the best comrades a boy could ask for. He hadn't suffered from a lack of friends since he was 6 years old.

He remembered the promise, a stray thought crossed Brie's mind as he scrubbed his scarred face. Even though he was gossiping with those other children, he didn't say a word about my real situation. For some reason, this made Brie's heart lift.

The rest of the party passed through his review quickly, although he lingered briefly on the Weasley siblings, that bushy-haired girl, and on the Indian girl who hadn't introduced herself. For the most part, he got the impression that he would be able to tolerate them so long as they stopped talking about his family. They could speculate about him all they like – he couldn't blame them for being curious.

This year should be extremely amusing.

Neville entered the dorm, heart pounding. He breathed a small sigh of relief when he noticed Gabriel's absence. He made his way over to his bed, only to be brought up short when it wasn't where it was supposed to be. Blinking in befuddlement, he found his trunk and stared down at it in surprise.

When he saw who would be sleeping next to him, everything fell into place and he groaned quietly. An entire year in close quarters with mal Théa... Wonderful. Throwing suspicious glances toward the extremely tidy bed to his left, Neville began getting ready for bed.

He was just shoving his textbooks into his headboard when the door to the bathroom opened. His head shot up and he met the startling green gaze of the Lieutenant General.

Gabriel stood framed in the door for a moment, then walked slowly over to his bed by the door. He sat stiffly on the edge, facing Neville and catching his eyes.

"I'm sorry," Neville apologized miserably after a moment, breaking eye contact.

His unwanted companion made a brief sound that could've been anything from agreement to condemnation. Neville hunched down further. The silence stretched for a moment, then was broken by a quiet snort of laughter. Neville's head shot up.

"Am I really that bad?" the French teen inquired curiously. His tone wasn't exactly friendly, but it did invite conversation, which was something at least.

"Er, well... yeah," Neville admitted awkwardly, rubbing his arm slightly. He imagined that it had never been the same since its violent encounter with the boy across from him. And his subsequent encounter with the boy's terrifying Healer sister. "Not as bad as your sister, though," Neville added, deciding to attempt the offered conversation.

Another snort of implied amusement. "No one is as bad as The Bitch," Gabriel inserted dryly, definite warmth in his voice. "Even my Lord Uncle gets the willies around her."

Neville gave a slightly high-pitched giggle that he choked off immediately. What could he possibly say to that? Oh dear. His mind grasped for a suitable reply.

"So, er, what made you decide to come here?" Perhaps an abrupt change in subject would be wisest.

"My parents," responded Gabriel, not encouraging a deeper examination of the subject. "Why are you here?"

"My parents," Neville replied with a nervous smile. He definitely remembered the 'parents' conversation he'd had with this boy – was it really five years ago?

"How are they?" The question didn't sound merely polite. There was definitely a hint that the other teen honestly cared about the answer.

"Same as ever," Neville responded, mind abstracting slightly, running over recent memories of his mother and father. "Mum gave me another candy wrapper."

"I trust you cherish them," Gabriel replied, sounding serious. As if he thought doing anything else was unthinkable. Neville felt his heart lift – in that statement was a hint of the boy he'd exchanged letters with at 11. Not even his Gran realized that he kept the wrappers – and here was mal Théa, assuming he kept them all.

"Yeah," Neville smiled softly. "I know it's silly..."

"It isn't," Gabriel interjected, fingering something under his pillow. Neville decided not to ask.

"Um, anyways, I am sorry about tonight. I promise it won't happen again."

"Hmm," came the hum of agreement as Gabriel seemed to decide it was time to sleep. He pulled his feet up into bed and closed the curtains.

Neville closed his own curtains and lay back with a long sigh. Maybe this year wouldn't be so bad. He wasn't naïve enough to think it would be easy, but at least it didn't seem as though he needed to worry about writing that last will and testament.

Brie woke up instantly. There was no sleepy in between state for the Lieutenant General – the combined efforts of horrible nightmares and nightmarish uncles had long since trained him out of such luxuries.

The dorm was dark and silent as he slipped out of his curtains. Apparently the other boys didn't hold with waking up at five in the morning. That suited Brie just fine, as it meant a broader window of privacy in which to go through his normal morning routine.

He did a quick round of pull ups with the aid of his canopy frame – a quick charm had ensured that it would support his weight. He did two sets of sit ups and a set of push ups before limping off to take a shower.

His showers were one of his daily personal luxuries. Often they were his only luxuries, and he no longer felt any compunction to hurry through them unless he had direct orders to do so. (Or if some idiot soldier decided to steal his hot water – that had been cause for

dishing out several severe beatings over the years. Most of the men had wised up by now, and as a return courtesy he took his showers early.)

Wrapping a towel around his waist, he went to stand in front of the mirror. He cut a striking figure, and he wasn't above admitting it. He had seen pictures of himself before The Ritual and had seen pictures of his biological father and mother. All things considered, he'd been well on his way to being scrawny, pale, blind and messy-haired. Not to mention short from severe malnutrition.

He sent a mental prayer of thanks to Vishnu that his mother had gone through with the full adoption and the Blood Ritual. Even if it did mean weak leg bones that had an annoying tendency to snap at inopportune moments.

Carefully he began drying his hair, finger combing it so that it fell in the loose curls that were a badge of the mal Théa clan. Curly hair might be a pain, but he wouldn't trade his for the world. Pulling his hair into his favored loose horsetail, he quickly brushed his teeth and walked back out to his bed.

The other boys were still sound asleep, so Brie didn't bother with a temporary glamour over his heavily scarred body. His more permanent facial glamour had been updated before he went to sleep and would last at least a week – though that didn't stop him from renewing it daily. Better safe than sorry.

Opening his trunk, he glared down at the Hogwarts uniform. He'd never gotten over his initial dislike of robes (he still privately thought of them as man-dresses) and wasn't overly pleased that he was now required to wear one every day. At least it was simple. And black. He could live with it, as long as they didn't expect him to wear anything more elaborate. If they tried to make him wear dress robes, he'd be forced to kill someone.

The robes weren't even the worst part. Did the boys here really dress like that? Really – dress shirts and knit vests? And color-coordinated ties? Not to mention the horrid pointy hats that he hadn't even bothered to buy.

Briefly he wondered if anyone would have the guts to tell him 'no' should he wear standard fatigues under that damned robe. Kali,

even the undecorated uniform he wore last night would be preferable – not as comfortable as the fatigues, but much better than that childish English getup.

Finally he settled on what he considered a decent compromise. The black slacks of the Hogwarts uniform were acceptable, and he put those on first, followed by his steel-toed combat boots. The prescribed shirt and vest were hastily discarded in favor of a long sleeved black shirt with a high standing collar. The shirt was scavenged off one of his more formal uniforms, and had embroidery at the collar and cuffs that indicated rank and merit. He doubted anyone would recognize it, but like the combat boots, it would still be there to make a statement.

He completely ignored the red and gold regalia that had been placed on top of his trunk (presumably by the house elves) and fished under the bed for his cane. It was his favorite of four that he owned. The other three were currently in his trunk, metaphorically gathering dust until he needed them.

This one was the simplest of them, though one of the more expensive. It was wrapped in black leather with embossed Hindi proverbs encircling it. He smiled slightly as he fingered one. Tete paa. Nv pasaariye jetii laambii saur. 'Know your limits.' The proverbs had been his mother's idea, and she had hand picked them for her cunningly reckless son.

The proverbs swept up from the silver Arabesque cap to the smooth silver handle. A small serpent coiled at the base of the grip, hidden unless you knew it was there. With a single word and a finger to the serpent, the cane would spring release the case and leave Brie armed with a slender sword.

Sometimes he really loved his mother.

Brie shook free of his musings and stood. He slipped on the school robe with distaste, leaving it hanging open in a combination of challenge and optimal comfort.

Kneeling by his trunk, he pulled out his book bag. He slung it over his shoulder and stood, relocking the chest. Time to face the world.

Hermione sat cross legged in front of the fire, re-reading the first few chapters of their new Potions textbook. Knowing Gryffindor luck, they would manage to get Snape on their first day. If they did, she had every intention of being completely and utterly ready.

Her book bag was packed lightly this morning – it was the only time this year she would be able to pick it up without liberal applications of the feather light charm. As they didn't know which classes they'd be having, even Hermione didn't see the sense in bringing books to breakfast this morning.

Except for her Potions text. She wasn't going to risk going anywhere without the Potions textbook until she knew exactly when she wouldn't need it.

"Your margin notes are inaccurate."

Hermione let out a muffled yelp, jerking to face the newcomer. As soon as her heart started beating again she could feel her face heat up with anger.

Mal Théa. Wonderful.

The incorrectly attired mal Théa was settling onto the couch above her as if it belonged to him, acting as though insulting her intelligence was something to be done lightly. She glared at him, eyes smoldering. He simply stared back at her with an air of detached interest.

"Like you would know," she spat angrily. "You couldn't even read them, let alone analyze them that fast! Your high and mighty act might fool Neville, but I think you're just a boy with delusions of grandeur. Just because you have famous relations doesn't give you the right to go around insulting other people! Hours of research went into my notes, thank you very much!"

The teenager let her rant, watching her with that damned vague interest. She trailed off, breathing heavily and probably quite red in the face.

"Your hair frizzes when you get mad," said mal Théa.

"I. Don't. Care." She informed him from between clenched teeth.

"You misunderstand the properties of Ashwinder eggs," he informed her, jumping back to the Potions notes he had glimpsed over her shoulder. "They have to be frozen."

It took Hermione a moment to re-orient herself to the sudden switch in conversation, then rolled her eyes at the boy. "Everyone knows that," she snapped scathingly. "Just because I—"

"If they are frozen for over a month," he continued mildly, ignoring her outburst, "they begin to gain potency. Not loose it. The Amortentia potion, for example, requires eggs that have been frozen for a year and a day, exactly, for full potency."

Hermione blinked, completely flummoxed. She hadn't known that. Immediately, she opened her text book and started flipping through it, mumbling to herself. On a separate piece of parchment she began noting down other sources to cross-reference. Within moments she was completely engrossed in her studying, ignoring mal Théa's continued presence.

After a good twenty minutes of egging the brunette on, Brie decided he was bored. The girl had stopped rising to his bait, simply making note of his suggestions and speeding on. It was actually making him a bit homesick.

Both Mama and Ami were extremely talented at Potions. He lacked their flair, but he made up for it through sheer force of will. It had been one of those things that, as a child, frustrated him endlessly. Now he found solace in his personal army.

Mama was a Potions Master, though she taught Muggle Studies. Her first love would always be cauldrons and experimentation. She was responsible for several poisons and black-market potions that several European Ministries were scrambling to stamp out. (Brie was pretty sure several of them had been accidental, though Mama claimed that nothing happened by accident in HER lab.)

She began letting him help and observe in her lab when he turned 7. He had learned to prepare ingredients with precision, as well as categorize them and name their properties. This was helped by the fact that Professor Tierra had been very thorough in her teaching of botany during his stay at Salem.

Ami was a Healer, and a good one, despite being only 22. She could brew Potions with precision and creativity, but generally preferred to leave that side of matters to her mother or anyone else who could be drafted into what she called the grunt work. She was the one who had made sure he knew that their mother's "throw things in and see what happens" policy wasn't quite as random as it appeared. (This information came too late to save then-eight-year-old Brie's eyebrows, but it had stopped him from trying again.)

Now at 16, Brie considered himself adept at Potions. Not a genius by a long shot, but comfortable and competent in a lab. He rather liked Ami's "that's what minions are for" approach to the subject, and was anxious to begin utilizing it once he left school.

Mind playing different scenarios of directing big muscle-bound privates through a ballet of Potions-making, Brie quietly slipped out of the Gryffindor Common room. It was 7am, another hour before the rest of the school started to stir. A good time to explore and think, he decided. He set off in a random direction, momentarily ignoring the map of Hogwarts Levi had made him memorize. It was more fun to get lost.

Dear Reuben,

I hope everything is going well, and that you settled in just fine. I remember visiting Hogwarts when I was a young girl and I remember thinking it was supremely ugly. Hopefully it's gotten somewhat better over the years. Have they gotten rid of those nasty suits of armor yet? Or at least oiled them?

Don't kill anyone, please, for my sake. I don't care what that worthless brother of mine might have told you, but if I hear anything to indicate that you're adding to the skeletons in my closet, I will be most put out.

Make sure you say hello to young Mr Longbottom. I know you two don't get on well, but he is Augusta's grandson. That means I expect you to be civil, young man! No more arm snapping.

I miss you already, you brat. Was it really necessary for you to sneak away without saying goodbye? You're just anxious to break a poor old woman's heart, aren't you.

Ami sends her love. ("You're writing the idiot already? Hmph." Only without the Hmph. Can you imagine your sister making a Hmph sound? Yes, laughable, I know.) Audric sends books. (Of course.) He asked me to remind you that you promised to write him a commentary on that book of strategies. (Boys and their silly wars! At least your brother is sensible enough to leave the actual fighting to others.) Tayce has been asking for you. It breaks my heart to have to tell her that you've fallen off the face of the world. (She started crying when I told her that Shay sent you to Hell. Ami got mad at me, so I changed my wording a little bit. It's not my fault you went to England of all places!)

I suppose there isn't a whole lot else to tell you. After all, you've only been gone a few days. So! Enjoy yourself, but don't enjoy yourself too much. I expect you to write me every week, or I'll decide you must be dead or something. If you die, I will send you a Howler. So I don't recommend it.

Enjoy the cookies! Rosie made your favorites, of course. Cossette promised to send some of her chocolates when she heard you'd been sent into exile. Apparently no one should be in exile without chocolate. Go figure.

Give Levi an extra big hug from me, and make sure he actually goes outside sometime this year. Be good, and make sure you give those English schoolteachers a run for their money! Show them what a mal Théa can do.

With love,

Mama Rai

P.S. Say hi to Peeves for me! Tell him Shri sends her love.

Levi:

Brie promised he'd pass on this letter, so let me know as soon as you get it to spare him his eardrums. I'm putting you directly in charge of him, you hear? If anything bad happens, you'll be the one with a Howler. So don't let him kill anyone this time.

I've been doing pretty good, though I'm a little angry with daddy right now. No one saw fit to tell ME that Brie was running off to England for the year. Ugh! I should have been the first to know. But it won't change anything to complain about it.

I'll be starting school in a week. I'm so excited! Rance has been bouncing off the walls. I don't suppose you'll tell him to stop? Not that he'll listen, of course, brother or not.

Go outside! That's an order, and I'm going to be informing Brie that I gave it to you. Knowing him, I would expect an "Invitation" to go on one of those weekend "hikes" he and daddy love so much. Did I ever tell you that he tricked me into accompanying him once? Never again! So go out and fly with him, or something.

I should probably go. I'm supposed to be getting fitted for some new clothes right now, but the seamstress is so pushy! And she keeps sticking me with the pins! She does make pretty dresses, though.

I'll talk to you later. Make sure Brie gets on alright.

XOXO,

Fae

A/N: The two letters were (or are to be) delivered at breakfast. Fae, if you're curious, has turned up several times before. She was mentioned in chapters 2, 4 and 7, to be precise.

Chapter Nine: Dungeons and Dragons

Brie was thoroughly lost and thoroughly enjoying himself. The castle was much larger than Levi had led him to believe. He had already discovered two secret passages – or at least awkward, hard to find passages. In a place like this, it was safer to assume that nothing was completely secret.

The passage he was examining now was a broom closet that led into a dungeon cell. Not just any dungeon cell, either, but a nice damp, dank, dark, moldy-walls-and-skeletons dungeon cell. Brie was ecstatic. He brushed off a clinging spider web and walked over to examine the skeleton. Was it there for decoration? Did some past teacher do the gene pool a favor and lock an exceptionally stupid child away? Were the dungeons actually used in the past for something other than classrooms and dormitories?

The dust was thick in the cell, but very little could stamp out the lingering scent of death. Brie breathed deeply and smiled, a pang of homesickness rising before he could stop it. Death was a smell he would always associate with Uncle Shay. Smiling wistfully, he crouched to inspect the chained skeleton more closely. 300 years dead, he decided. Give or take a decade.

Exiting the room through the conventional doorway, he was pleasantly surprised to find it opened to his hand as easily as any password protected door ever had. He'd expected to need Alohomora at the very least. Oh well, this worked just as well.

The corridor he stepped into was dusty, and it was very obvious that no one had set foot in it for years beyond count. Conditioned to be unwilling to leave a trail of footsteps, Brie cast a scouring charm to remove the dust.

The revealed stone floor echoed ominously every time his cane connected with the floor. Brie was finding this excursion very relaxing indeed. The dungeon was wonderfully archaic, and he had the feeling that he could spend months exploring and still not come to the end of its secrets.

Poking around, he found traces of what might've been torture chambers, or at least places for "forceful questionings." He found an Iron Maiden, which he regretfully decided not to open. Such things

were often home to creatures such as bogarts, and with his tendency toward panic attacks under certain stimuli, he wasn't anxious to test his luck.

Finally, regretfully, he began to make his way back toward the main area of the castle. Halfway there he was surprised by the sound of someone clearing their throat. He immediately tensed, whirling to face the potential threat as he settled into a more solid fighting position. He hadn't heard anyone approach, which immediately got his adrenaline pounding – only Uncle Shay and Ami could still sneak up on him these days.

He relaxed slightly when he saw who – or more precisely what – his would-be attacker was.

"Mal Théa," the ghost greeted in a voice that sounded a bit like fingernails on a chalkboard.

Brie just nodded, frowning slightly. He wasn't overly fond of ghosts. The only ghost he'd ever met was old Eusatchius Malfoy who had been tortured to death in the mal Théa dungeons three generations ago and for some reason was still hanging around. The old bastard gave Brie the willies. It wasn't so much the whole cliché of being "confronted by death" as it was that ghosts were just plain creepy. After all, what kind of masochistic bastard wanted to stick around after his sweet release?

"You are missing breakfast," the ghost observed in that fingernails-on-chalkboard voice.

"I know," said Brie. He hadn't meant to get so caught up in his explorations...but it couldn't be helped. If he was late, so be it. He refused to check his watch in answer to a damn ghost.

There was a brief silence in which both parties sized the other up. The ghost was, of course, silvery and insubstantial. He had died wearing ornate court clothing from a very long time ago, and fairly reeked of danger and politics. Ghostly blood left a very interesting story for Brie's professional eyes.

"Tablillas?" Brie finally asked, squinting at the ghost. "And a wheel? I'd suggest the Maiden, but that wasn't around in your time. No, good old fashioned knives would be a better guess."

The ghost looked genuinely surprised for a moment, as though no one had ever before dared bring up the subject of his various bloodstains. Brie merely looked on in detached interest. He got the feeling that he had somehow just stolen the upper hand and he wasn't about to give it back.

"Baron Timotheus Horatio," the ghost declared. The baron nodded in the direction Brie had been walking. "Let me escort you out of the dungeon."

"Lieutenant General Gabriel mal Théa. My thanks." Brie could find his own way out, of course, but it would be much faster to accept the Baron's help. Not to mention far more interesting. As grating as the ghost's voice was, the young warrior had no doubt that he could prove both a valuable ally and an interesting source of information. He began walking.

Hermione looked up as the four sixth year boys stampeded down the stairs. Ginny had already come down and was yawning on the couch, watching Hermione through half-lidded eyes.

"Studying already?" Ron stared at her – not in surprise, really. More like exasperation.

"Potions," she began primly, "is an extremely important part of the NEWTS curriculum. I do not intend to fail."

"Yah, yah," Seamus waved her off. "We know, Hermione. But it's the first day."

"If we have Potions and Snape calls on you, I am going to be laughing inside, Finnegan," Hermione retorted. She stood up stiffly, shoving her notes into her book bag with her text book. Stretching out the kinks in her back, she mentally reviewed her surprisingly productive morning. To think that mal Théa might have brains along with his brawn...

"Come on," Ron glanced between his best friend and the girl he claimed he was going to marry some day. "Let's get down to breakfast. I'm starved!"

The six left the common room, somewhat subdued by the cloud of The First Day Of School. They were half way to the Great Hall before Ginny stopped.

"Where's mal Théa?" she asked abruptly, looking around as if expecting him to pop out of the woodwork.

"Who cares?" asked Dean. Obviously he didn't, Hermione noted.

"He wasn't there when we woke up," Neville offered the redhead. He didn't sound too put out either.

"He was up early," said Hermione as she got the group to start walking again. "He was giving me a hard time about my studying."

"So?" Ginny prompted. "He wasn't down there when I woke up! Did he head to breakfast by himself?"

Hermione ran a hand through her hair. Come to think of it, where did he go? She couldn't remember him leaving, but obviously he had.

"I don't know," she admitted. "He must've left while I was distracted."

They had to shoo two stray first years out of their usual spots at the Gryffindor table. As they began dishing out their breakfast, Hermione and Ginny turned to focus on their new-found source of information.

"So how did it go last night?" Ginny inquired, offering Neville a plate of bacon.

"Um, ok. I guess. He didn't break my arm," Neville said this last part brightly, as if it were supposed to reassure his friends.

"Does... Does that surprise you?" Hermione blinked at him.

Neville shrugged, blushing slightly. "Well, see, last time we were alone together he did. Break my arm, that is. In three places."

Ginny choked on her eggs and Hermione's eyebrows shot upwards. Neville just continued blithely.

"At least this time, if he did break it, it'd be Madam Pomfrey who would fix it. That wouldn't be so bad at all."

"Not so bad," Hermione squeaked, staring at Neville as if he'd grown another head. He just shrugged. "How could breaking your arm in three places be not so bad?"

Neville's eyes darted around the room in what Hermione feared was on its way to becoming nervous habit with Mal Théa around. He didn't seem inclined to continue, so Hermione decided not to keep pushing. After all, he was her best friend. Pressuring him didn't seem like a very friendly thing to do.

"So what did you talk about?" Ginny asked instead, leaning forward, brown eyes bright in anticipation of interesting tidbits.

"Um, this and that," Neville replied vaguely, shoveling food into his mouth in an attempt to stall for time.

"Rather less of this," a dry voice commented from somewhere to the left of the girls. Hermione turned to stare at Mal Théa, who was leaning on his cane just outside her peripheral vision.

As soon as they were looking at him, he took the last few steps over to seat himself next to Neville, who immediately made room for the broad shouldered young man. Mal Théa leaned his cane casually against the table and began filling his plate.

"Good morning Mal Théa," Ginny greeted brightly, giving the French boy a blinding smile. Hermione nearly winced. It was that smile. The one Ginny used to make the boys follow her around like puppies. It rarely failed to turn a perfectly rational boy into a drooling idiot. Hermione had only seen Fleur Delacour, the part veela, get consistently better results.

Mal Théa didn't do anything more than glance at the redhead. "Ginevra," he replied without enthusiasm, but with exacting politeness.

"Just Ginny," the girl hurried to correct. Hermione smiled. She knew how much Ginny hated her full name. She'd been known to bribe The Twins into doing horrible things to people who dared to use it.

Mal Théa didn't say anything, but Hermione had the feeling that he planned to continue using the formal version. Whether it was because it obviously irritated the younger girl or because he was uncomfortable with a more casual form of address, Hermione couldn't begin to guess.

"Where did you go this morning?" Hermione asked instead, trying not to sound accusing.

The boy raised an eyebrow at her. "Reconnaissance," he said, not bothering to elaborate on this one word answer. Hermione grimaced. Wonderful. A curt smart ass. What a pleasant start to the year.

McGonagall came by to give them their timetables, stopping briefly to welcome the transfer student and give him instructions to visit her office should he need anything. He waved her away – a teacher, no less! – and began looking over his timetable.

Glancing down at her own schedule, Hermione groaned. "Double Potions this afternoon," she said. "Charms this morning, that's not so bad, and History before lunch."

"I've got Transfiguration," Ginny informed them brightly. "And DADA this afternoon. Only two classes today, wonderful!"

"I've got same as Hermione," said Neville glumly. "Except I've got Divination instead of Potions."

"Have you heard anything about the new Defense professor?" Ginny inquired, staring down at her timetable as though it held some sort of answers.

"Professor Black?" Hermione clarified. "No, not really. I mean, there was all that uproar about false murder charges a few years back, but I haven't heard anything about him as a teacher."

"I wish Professor Kline had stuck around for a second year," Ginny sighed. "Now that woman knew what she was talking about!"

"What's your schedule today, Gabriel?" Neville turned toward the boy sitting next to him in an attempt to draw him into the conversation. Green eyes flickered with some unknowable emotion before Neville was rewarded for his attempt.

"Charms, History and Potions," mal Théa gave Hermione a slight nod of acknowledgement for their identical schedules.

"How about tomorrow?" Neville pressed.

"Defense, Transfiguration, and Ancient Runes. I have Herbology later in the week."

"Me too, only I have Arithmancy as well," said Hermione, not quite sure whether to be excited or worried about having a nearly identical schedule to mal Théa. Now that they had NEWTS classes, it wasn't a guarantee that you'd be in classes with your Housemates – she'd been rather looking forward to getting away, actually. And she definitely hadn't been expecting to be spending time with an arrogant French boy.

"I don't have Arithmancy or Ancient Runes," Neville offered as he shoved his paper into his book bag and returned to eating breakfast. "I think you're both barmy to try and take so many NEWT level classes."

"It isn't so bad, Neville," Hermione grinned. "They're all ever so interesting!"

"Why are you taking so many Ga—mal Théa?" Ginny asked, tripping slightly over his name and blushing slightly. Mal Théa gave her an amused sort of look, but didn't comment on the slip.

"I might as well," said mal Théa with an idle half shrug. Apparently finished with breakfast, he rose to his feet. When no one immediately followed him, he gave them a rather ironic look. Hermione scrambled to her feet, eyes narrowed. He was assuming that they were going to walk him to class, but Hermione wouldn't cave that easily, oh no...

"Let's go!" Ginny smiled brightly from where she had popped up at Hermione's elbow. Hermione glared at her friend's betrayal, but deflated when Neville stood up and nodded. Oh well. She would need to get used to the new Gryffindor sooner or later.

Ginny only walked to the door of the Great Hall with them before they had to split up. Waving cheerfully, she headed toward

Transfiguration, leaving Neville and Hermione alone with the cane-wielding sixteen year old.

They were in the hall and partway to the Charms classroom when Malfoy appeared in front of them, surrounded by Slytherin sycophants. Ah bloody hell, Hermione groaned internally. Just what they needed.

Since she was the one who had been walking front and center, she felt it her duty to speak up first, beating the blonde boy to the punch.

"Malfoy," her lips thinned in exasperation. "Excuse us. You're in our way."

"No, you're in mine, mudblood," Malfoy drawled at her, turning toward the French teen who lurked on the far left of their little group. He ignored her spluttering and gave mal Théa a smarmy sort of smile.

"Gabriel," he greeted. "I didn't know you planned to transfer here! You should have written to let me know, I would have been quite happy to show you around and..." his eyes flicked over the other Gryffindors in a seemingly accidental way. "Introduce you to our sort." He gestured pointedly to the Slytherins gathered around.

Hermione was seething, feeling a bit like bursting into tears. She hated Malfoy. Hated hated hated him. And now he was right there, standing between her and class, calling her evil things and buttering up to one of the few Gryffindors who might possibly be up to her intellectual standards. Ugh! Despite the fact that mal Théa didn't exactly summon warm fuzzy feelings in her heart, she would hate to see him won over by that git of a Malfoy.

"Draco," mal Théa's voice had lowered slightly in pitch, falling into something dark, silky, and utterly dangerous. Hermione's thoughts cut off abruptly as the Frenchman stepped front and center. He towered over Malfoy, despite only being a few inches taller. Suddenly his cane no longer looked like decoration or weakness. He made no move to unsheathe his wand, but the way he stood screamed dominance and power. Malfoy suddenly looked small and rather insignificant.

"I was not aware we were on a first name basis," mal Théa said in a deceptively cordial manner, his French accent lending a strange sort of weight to his speech. "Nor that my judgment in any way required direction."

Malfoy seemed almost to melt before the intensity of the boy he had been attempting to hustle.

"No, no, of course not," Malfoy hurried to offer assurance, holding his hands out palm up in entreaty. "I apologize. I simply wished to offer you my assistance."

Mal Théa made that odd humming noise in the back of his throat that he seemed to make instead of more normal 'hmm' or 'mhmm' sorts of noises. It sounded extremely sinister all of a sudden.

"Your assistance, little dragon?" he nearly purred. "I would not require assistance if my path had not been obstructed."

"The mudblood," Draco began heatedly, his cheeks gaining a slight pink tinge at the unorthodox pet name mal Théa had just used.

He didn't get a chance to finish, as he was suddenly no longer standing in front of an amused Gabriel mal Théa. Instead, he was pinned to the wall by a single dark hand around his pale throat. From her vantage point, Hermione would've sworn mal Théa's eyes were glowing a sickly green. "erk," was all Malfoy managed, gray eyes wide with shock as one skinny hand clawed at mal Théa's wrist.

Hermione stared. How could one person go from dark-amused-quiet to dark-amused-intense-dangerous to dark-intense-lethal in such a short space of time? And what would happen now? She found it very hard to care what happened to Malfoy. As far as she could tell, he was getting his just desserts.

It was a surreal picture. Skinny, pale Draco Malfoy, bane of Hogwarts, who always looked perfect and cool and untouchable, held by the throat against a stone wall, weakly struggling against his captor. Muscular, dark Gabriel mal Théa, radiating intense passion under a veneer of cold abstraction, overwhelmed the blond effortlessly.

"You will never use that word in my presence again," mal Théa informed the other boy in a strangely casual tone. "It is beneath Us," the capital letter was audible, "who share magical blood. You will respect me even if you cannot respect our heritage. Do you understand?"

Malfoy nodded as best he could, eyes wide. The rest of the hall was silent as mal Théa released the blond and stepped back, completely unruffled. He nodded coldly toward the gasping Malfoy and walked slowly toward the cluster of Slytherins.

They backed away slightly to leave him room to pass, and he nodded civilly. He paused long enough to bow over the hand of a regal looking Fifth Year girl and to exchange a wordless handshake with Blaise Zabini. Then he cleared the group, continuing on toward the Charms room as though nothing had happened.

Hermione and Neville darted after him, eyes wide with shock. They caught up as he stepped into the classroom and took a seat. He looked exactly as he had when they left the Great Hall. Absolutely nothing about him showed that he had just put the fear of God into Draco bloody Malfoy.

"What just happened?" Hermione breathed, plopping down next to mal Théa. He somehow managed to look both supremely innocent and completely aloof. She wondered how he did it.

"You sat down by me," he murmured, eyes flicking back to the front where Professor Flitwick was making last minute preparations. "Who is that?"

Hermione ignored his question. "What happened with Malfoy?"

"Oh, Draco? You saw," mal Théa gave a dismissive almost-shrug. "We had a minor disagreement. In my experience, these are common at boarding schools."

Hermione took a deep breath in preparation for a rant, but Professor Flitwick cut in first to take attendance. She huffed quietly in irritation, turning to pay attention to the professor. She would grill mal Théa later, after she'd briefed Ginny on the encounter.

Yeah, she griped mentally. "Minor disagreements" are quite common. But not ones that involve grabbing the biggest bully in the school and... and... bullying him! She couldn't help a slightly vindictive emotion rising up as the adrenaline faded. It had felt so good to watch Malfoy get what was coming to him! I wonder what will happen next... After all, Malfoy tended to take rivalries and enmity pretty seriously – and that hadn't exactly been a friendly male bonding ritual she had just witnessed.

And why was mal Théa so touchy about Malfoy calling me a mudblood?

Charms passed quickly. Brie admittedly spent more time watching the odd little teacher than really paying attention, but when they were called to prove they remembered spells from previous years he participated easily.

He couldn't wait for History. It had been his favorite subject since he was six year old and reenacting ancient battles with the help of old Malcolm. During his extremely irregular schooling at Beauxbaton, he'd always loved sitting in on History classes the best. The teacher didn't have the same passion as Malcolm, but now Brie was old enough to understand the nuances of the subject, and that almost made up for the professor's lack.

Uncle Shay was alternately amused and exasperated with Brie's obsession, and had contented himself with coaching Brie's passion for history into a passion for military history. Brie's first captain had been a history buff, too, and had been more than willing to give the boy lessons. Even now, with Brie as a commanding officer, the two occasionally sat down for tea to pour over old battles.

Of course, Brie didn't delude himself into thinking that what they taught here would be his favorite type of history. It was still history, though, and this time it would have a Wizarding UK spin on it. It should prove extremely interesting.

As soon as they were formally dismissed from Charms, Brie collected his things and waited for his two – companions? minions? certainly not friends – by the door. Minions, Brie decided. You can never have too many minions.

"About Malfoy," the Granger girl began as they headed down the hall. Internally, Brie rolled his eyes. Who cared about Malfoy? The girl had been right there, collecting perfectly serviceable eye witness information. She hardly needed to know what had been going on inside his mind too.

"Who teaches History?" Brie turned a pointed look toward Neville. A look that said 'if you don't get the girl to shut up – now – you will not like the consequences.'

"Professor Binns," Longbottom supplied quickly, casting an apologetic glance at the scowling brunette. "He's a ghost. Dead boring," he added, smiling invitingly. It was obviously a common joke in the school, but Brie didn't show any acknowledgement of having heard the very bad pun.

Granger immediately began defending the professor. The small-talk lasted them through the walk to the classroom, for which Gabriel was grateful. He was mostly able to tune out his appropriated minions as he settled into a desk in the corner of the room. A strategic position in case of attack – also, a very difficult habit to break. He'd stopped trying years ago, since he just had to retrain himself every few months. It was much easier to be sharp and stay sharp.

As it turned out, the professor was just as deathly boring as predicted, much to Brie's dismay. His voice was a steady, monotonous drone that seemed to beg you to tune it out. Within ten minutes, he and Granger were the only two who were even pretending to be awake.

It was stomach churning to listen to the Goblin rebellions get slaughtered that way. Brie's mouth tightened, and he resisted the urge to raise his hand and challenge the ghost. Perhaps he would later, when he'd established himself here. Until then, he would endure the torture of dried up history.

Neville waved as he trotted off toward Divination, leaving Hermione alone with mal Théa. They continued walking silently toward the dungeons, though Hermione noted the Frenchman's covert interest in their surroundings. They were partway there when mal Théa suddenly paused, turning to look curiously at a large tapestry.

Opening her mouth to inquire why he'd stopped, Hermione was surprised to see the cloth suddenly buckle outwards as a figure wrestled free. It was the Fourth Year French transfer student, slightly out of breath and brushing frantically at invisible specks of dust.

The girl – Rousseau, Hermione remembered – looked up, startled, then relaxed when she saw who it was. The two transfers began a fast paced conversation in French, the girl gesturing expansively while mal Théa did more of those weird humming noises. Once in awhile Hermione was able to pick out words or phrases, but nothing that made sense.

what... idiot... no... yes... no... floor... hall... school... yes... yes...
Nikolai... down... no... see... where...

She stopped trying to follow and contented herself with smiling tightly in the background. The conversation ended when Rousseau glanced at the time, made a face and ran off. Mal Théa turned back to Hermione, a bland expression on his face.

"I apologize," he commented as they began walking again. "Rousseau can be... demanding, when encountered." She noticed with interest that his accent had gotten thicker all of the sudden. She wondered whether it would fade quickly, or if it would linger. Did it do that every time he switched languages?

"That's alright," Hermione shrugged, eyes on her feet as they walked the rest of the way to the Potions room, joining the small crowd waiting outside. By her side, mal Théa shifted slightly. She looked up, straight into the eyes of Draco Malfoy.

Théa

Chapter Ten: Exchange

"Mal Théa," Malfoy greeted with a nod and an odd look on his face. Hermione thought he looked mildly constipated, but refrained from commenting. He ignored her completely, apparently deciding to be intelligent for a change and not call her names around the powerful Frenchman who was apparently inclined to take offense at such things.

"Draco." A little shark's smile flashed white against dark skin as mal Théa's chin came up aggressively. Hermione watched his eyes dart through the crowd before focusing back on Malfoy. "You never did introduce me to your... companions." Mal Théa made that weird humming noise – it was beginning to get on Hermione's nerves – and quirked an eyebrow. She noticed that he refrained from calling Malfoy's posse his 'friends' and wondered if it was significant.

"Of course," said Malfoy. He tried to look superior, an expression quite obviously stolen from his father, but only managed to look like a bratty child. In comparison, mal Théa's more natural arrogance seemed cultured and refined. And since when was it a good thing to look naturally arrogant, Hermione wondered.

"This is Pansy Parkinson," said Malfoy while his pug-faced girlfriend bobbed a curtsy. Mal Théa gave her a brief nod.

"Crabbe and Goyle," the two hulking brutes grunted at mal Théa and seemed to puff up slightly. Hermione was put in mind of animals strutting and posturing, trying to prove dominance. Tall, broad mal Théa looked patently unimpressed and didn't even give them the benefit of an acknowledging nod.

Hermione didn't know a whole lot about the pureblood traditionalist faction beyond what she'd read in old novels, but even she could tell that Crabbe and Goyle had just fallen in everyone's eyes, for no other reason than they had been deemed dismissible by a powerful newcomer. It was fascinating, actually, in a very medieval sort of way.

"Tracey Davis," Malfoy hurried to introduce the two girls standing slightly to the side, "and Daphne Greengrass."

Mal Théa nodded dismissively to Tracey, but murmured a greeting to Daphne, accompanied by something that, with a little imagination, might be called a bow. Both girls smiled and curtsied, Tracey saying it was an honor, and Daphne expressing pleasure at renewing their acquaintance.

Blaise Zabini, the last of the Slytherins present, stepped forward without waiting for Malfoy to say anything. It seemed to Hermione that he was making a very definite statement by doing so, but she couldn't for the life of her figure out the hidden message. Politics she knew, but this weird social dance definitely existed outside her areas of expertise.

The two boys clasped forearms and spoke rapidly in – was that Latin? – before releasing each other. Zabini was smiling in that weird, removed way he had, and Mal Théa looked a little bit more like a human being.

Hermione couldn't decide whether or not she should be feeling uncomfortable right now. On the one hand, her only Gryffindor companion was currently being buddy-buddy with Slytherins. On the other, he was providing a shield between her and them – after what had happened to Malfoy earlier, they were all too busy actively ignoring her to cause her any grief.

Besides, it was rather intriguing to watch purebloods in their natural habitat – or as close to it as a 'mudblood' like her was ever likely to get.

"Granger."

Hermione shrank a little to find herself suddenly the focus of two sets of extremely intense eyes. Zabini, at least, she was used to. She tried not to look startled.

"Mal Théa," she responded coolly. She tilted her chin up, subconsciously echoing Mal Théa's aggressive stance.

"You are familiar with Blaise Zabini?"

"Passingly," Hermione hedged, uncertain where this was going. Was he introducing her the way Malfoy had introduced his posse? Was she being pulled into that backstabbing dance of social status?

Mal Théa's eyes seemed to be laughing at her, even though nothing else about him betrayed any sort of emotion. He made that stupid humming noise, then made a slight gesture toward the elegant black boy standing beside him. "Granger, Blaise Zabini. Blaise, Hermione Granger."

To Hermione's surprise, Zabini gave her a deep nod of acknowledgement.

"Um, hi," she said with a tight smile. There was no way she was attempting a curtsy, thank you very much. Bookworms don't curtsy. Mudbloods don't curtsy. They say 'um, hi.' A somewhat awkward conversation followed the somewhat awkward introduction, and for the first time ever, Hermione was glad when Snape arrived.

Brie took in the classroom with interest. With three to a desk, it made sense to sit with Blaise and Granger. He, of course, sat on the far edge in the most easily defensible position with his back against a wall. Granger didn't seem thrilled with the idea of sitting in the back, but seemed even less pleased with the idea of sitting alone or with Malfoy.

Finnegan and Thomas were both present, but they had a pretty Ravenclaw witch sitting with them, and seemed content to leave the bushy haired girl to Brie. She didn't complain as she sat down in the middle seat.

The professor swept through the doors after the students, robes billowing slightly around him. "Old bat," a Hufflepuff student mumbled irritably to his Ravenclaw companion. Brie did notice a certain passing resemblance, but quashed any inner amusement before it could more than register.

Severus Snape, Potions Master. This wasn't the first time he had heard the name. Uncle Shay spoke of the man once in awhile, always in conjunction with the Dark Lord. Snape was powerful in his own way, Shay had warned. The man was fluid, like water, and not to be trusted or underestimated. Mama spoke of him as well, though more favorably than her brother did. According to her, Snape was rather well known in the Potions community. Although she'd never worked with him personally, they had exchanged letters and peer tested theories for each other.

The students at this school appeared to think quite poorly of him.

Snape was brooding at the front of the classroom, greasy dark hair hanging in front of his face, giving him a – in Brie's opinion at least – melodramatically sinister appearance. It probably intimidated normal children just fine, but Brie had seen the real thing. Still, he applauded the man for trying.

As soon as everyone had taken a seat, Snape began to speak. For an introduction to a class, it was delightfully dark and cynical. Deep inside, where it didn't show, Brie grinned. He would most definitely enjoy this class.

Roll call was peppered with the Potions Master's amusing comments as he read each name.

"Miss... Granger," Snape drawled. His sneer was audible.

The bushy haired girl replied with a prompt "present," her tone suggesting that she was resigned to the inevitable comments.

"Hardly a surprise. You seem to labor under the misconception that this class could not run without your presence. Contrarily, Miss Granger, we would get along quite well without additional Gryffindors. Isn't that right, Miss Greengrass." Daphne responded promptly, and role moved on. Malfoy was named with obvious approval.

Brie was beginning to form a picture of Professor Snape that was somewhat different from what his mother and uncle saw. Inwardly he admitted to being mildly intrigued.

"Mr... mal Théa," Snape looked up and met Brie's cool gaze. He did not look surprised, per se, but there was definitely an odd expression in his eyes.

"Sir," Brie responded levelly, not breaking eye contact yet verbally acknowledging that – in this classroom, at least – the other was his superior. Snape's dark eyes flashed with amusement, easily recognizing the game and accepting the gesture for what it was worth.

"Who would have thought... Rai's boy in Gryffindor. Your poor mother."

"Not at all, sir," Brie replied dryly, despite the fact that it had been a rhetorical statement. "My uncle may require condolences, but my mother is well enough pleased."

"I would shudder to think of Rai's child in my own House." Snape's tone was slightly strained, but Brie saw amusement in the tightly pressed lips and arched brow. This man was familiar with both entities named, after all. He would understand the references both to his uncle's preference for Slytherin or Ravenclaw and to his mother's propensity toward mischief.

Soon after that, the lecture began. From what Brie could gather, they would be working on several Potions he was very familiar with. Not that he would complain – he had no doubt that Snape expected him to turn in superior work.

Every once in awhile during the lecture, seemingly at random, Snape would snap out a question. To Brie, who had grown up with a Potions Mistress and a Healer, the questions were simple enough. Most of the students, however, stumbled over the answers or failed completely. He quickly picked out a pattern.

Slytherins always answered their questions correctly. Even Crabbe and Goyle, when called on, grunted out correct answers. Whether it was because they already knew what the questions would be or because they had additional tutoring or some altogether unrelated reason, they continually earned points for their House.

There were only two Hufflepuffs in the class, and they were both treated in a tolerant, patronizing sort of way. Their questions were usually easy, and when they got them right, they were given fewer points or none at all.

The Ravenclaws were given more difficult questions, though they always answered promptly. Snape seemed to believe that they, at least, were worthy of being in his classroom.

The Gryffindors, on the other hand, seemed to try Snape's patience just by existing. He ignored Granger completely, despite the fact that she seemed ready to burst with the answers to each and every

question, no matter how far beyond the scope of the class. Finnegan and Thomas were constantly bombarded with questions that even Brie was surprised by. Every time they answered wrong – and failure was inevitable – more points were removed from their House.

Brie might have found it amusing if he wasn't so fiercely competitive. Oh, he couldn't care less about school spirit or the boys in question, but McGonagall had explained the House Cup to him, and Gabriel mal Théa hated to lose.

After a particularly scathing round of questions against the Gryffindor boys that left them shaking with rage and humiliation, Brie stood up. Everyone turned to look at him, and Snape frowned dangerously. Like Granger, he had been ignored thus far – but no longer.

"Sir, may I redeem my House's honor?" The phrasing and tone were that of a respectful question, but the wording left no doubt that he intended to take it as an insult if he were denied the opportunity. Honor was everything.

Snape grimaced, but nodded. "Proceed, Mr mal Théa."

"Thank you, sir." Quickly but thoroughly, Brie answered every question asked of the two boys since the beginning of the class period, careful not to miss a single one. Thank Merlin that one of them had taken good notes. Granger didn't seem to notice his glances down at her scroll.

When he finished, he sat down calmly, serenely meeting the gaze of the Potions professor. The man looked pained. Brie had been careful to be excruciatingly polite – he wanted to win, yes, not make enemies with a potentially powerful ally. To damage this man's pride in any way would be a mistake.

Finally Snape gave a little nod, scowling in a generally disaffected sort of way. "20 points to Gryffindor, Mr mal Théa, for your remarkable recitation of Potions knowledge." It wasn't nearly as much as he had removed from the other two boys, but it was something. Brie gave a nod to acknowledge the professor's compliment and class moved on.

The bell rang soon after, and there was a frantic scramble for the students to get out of the classroom as quickly as possible. Brie didn't feel quite the same rush, instead packing his notes away at a more decorous pace. Granger waited for him, bouncing from foot to foot, though Blaise slipped away with a little nod.

"Mr mal Théa."

Brie turned to look at the Potions professor. The man beckoned him forward to the front of the classroom. Brie was immediately curious, and it took a moment for him to re-center himself for a possible confrontation.

"Miss Granger, you are dismissed," said Snape. Brie gave Granger a little smile, enjoying the startled look that flashed across her face. It was like she thought he didn't know how to smile or something.

"Sir?" he prompted after the door shut behind the other Gryffindor. He wasn't in any particular hurry, having no further classes that day, but he was extremely curious. Curiosity, he had found, was an unfortunate side effect of having Rai as a mother. Or perhaps it was genetic – he'd heard that both the Potters had been extremely curious people.

"You have an excellent grasp of this field," said Snape. "With a mother like yours, of course, I would expect no less." He pulled out a musty, leather-bound tome and handed it to Brie, who took it without looking to see what it was.

"Dismissed."

"Yes, sir." Brie turned and swept out of the room, discreetly tucking the book away as he went. He was burning with curiosity, but he knew the etiquette on such handoffs. Until he knew for certain that it was alright to be seen with the book, he would keep it well out of sight from prying eyes.

"You're back!" Ginny grinned as she looked up from where she had been studying by the fireplace. "You took longer than I expected. Neville's been back a whole half hour! He's upstairs changing right now. How was class?"

"Ugh," said Hermione eloquently as she flopped down on the sofa next to her friend.

"Ugh?" Ginny teased, raising an eyebrow in question. "Oh dear. Does this have anything to do with the rumor of our new Gryffindor friend strangling Malfoy in the hall?"

"He didn't strangle him, per se," Hermione frowned. "He just sort of... held him firmly by the neck."

Ginny laughed in delight, clapping her hands and settling back into the overstuffed cushions. "Oh do tell!"

"There's not much to say," Hermione shrugged.

"Not much to say about what?" asked Neville as he sat down on Ginny's other side. He had changed out of his uniform into casual robes. Hermione had never quite figured out how those were any more comfortable than the school uniform, but had given up pestering her friend about it years ago. To each his own, after all.

"About Malfoy getting his," prompted Ginny.

"Ah," Neville grimaced. "Hermione's right. There isn't much to say."

"Oh, come on!" Ginny cried, turning her head between her two older friends. She went through a variety of pity-me looks, trying to get one or both of them to give in and tell her the story.

"Malfoy called me mudblood," Hermione finally caved. "Mal Théa took offense and pinned him to the wall. Said something about respecting shared magical heritage or some such – it didn't make a whole lot of sense. I'll have to research it."

"Don't bother," Neville told her with a smile. "It's not something you're likely to find in the Hogwarts Library. It's Politics with a capital P."

Hermione looked interested, but Ginny waved her hand dismissively. "Politics are useless games that rich people play. I want to know why mal Théa got offended by Malfoy calling you... that name."

"You mean the fact that it's racist and discriminatory and horrible isn't enough?"

"You know what I mean, Hermione! But it's not like the mal Théas are 'blood traitors' like my family. They're as old and pure as they come! Why on earth would he care?"

Hermione shrugged. She had, after all, wondered exactly the same thing. Both girls turned to focus on Neville, who shifted uncomfortably under their questioning stares.

"You know, I can't actually read his mind," he said, gaze darting between two pairs of intense brown eyes. "You all seem to think I can, but I can't. I don't know!"

"We know you don't know anything, Neville," said Ron as he, Seamus, and Dean joined them in front of the fire. The redhead's easy, inclusive smile took the sting out of the words as Dean retorted that Ron knew less than anything, which got Seamus joining in about the correctness of the phrasing.

Hermione, Ginny, and Neville exchanged long-suffering glances, but made room to include the three boys. After all, once they had arrived there was no making them leave until they were good and ready.

The conversation quickly turned to more mundane topics. How were classes? How was McGonagall this year? Oh dear, that bad. What about Flitwick? Had mal Théa managed to stay awake through Binns's lecture? Who did Trelawney claim would die this year?

Other students drifted over to join in once in awhile before drifting away again, adding their own opinions and bits of gossip. It was nice being back at school, back within a tightly knit circle of friends. Hermione rewarded a particularly bright comment from Ron with a smile, and was treated to a spectacular blush. Yes, it was definitely nice to be back.

Brie settled himself carefully on the somewhat rickety Library chair. It didn't look particularly up to supporting his weight, but it held with minimal complaint. Thumping his bag on the equally ancient table, he settled in for some serious studying.

He had picked this corner after a bit of exploration. It wasn't as brightly lit as most of the other tables and was inconveniently located in the dead end of a rarely used section of books. Perfect for an overly paranoid soldier.

The book that Snape had given him was thick but small. The pages were turning yellow with age and curling in the corners. Opening up at random, Brie swore under his breath. How on earth had Snape come by a book in Parseltongue of all things? And why had he given it to Brie? Not that he was complaining, of course...

Flipping back to the beginning, he settled down for a nice long read. After all, in his experience anything written in the tongue of snakes was well worth examining.

Levi looked up as he was joined at his study table. Two older Ravenclaws were standing in his light. Padma Patil he knew in passing, despite the age difference. She was the only other Hindi speaker in Ravenclaw, and occasionally they would have discussions in that language. Levi was unfamiliar with her companion, though he recognized the boy as another Sixth Year Ravenclaw.

"Levi," Padma smiled at him brightly, sitting down in the chair across from him. "Naamaste, Aap kaise hain?"

"Bahut acha, shukriya." He turned his intense amber eyes toward the other newcomer. The older boy shifted uncomfortably under his gaze, looking toward Padma for rescue.

"Ah, this is Terry Boot," she introduced with a smile.

"Hello," he smiled at Levi, trying to look confident. With barely a nod, Levi dismissed him. He wasn't interested in these people. He had come to the Library to study, not socialize, after all.

"We were wondering if we could ask you something, Levi," Padma continued, pulling his attention away from his books again.

Inside the little scholar was groaning. There was no way he could get rid of them until he'd satisfied their curiosity – they were Ravenclaws, after all. His books would have to wait. Turning to

Padma, he decided to make this as uncomfortable for his inquisitors as possible.

People often told him that he was creepy. He had a gift for silence and stillness, and he had a way of focusing himself completely that tended to make others uncomfortable. Consciously, he stilled himself and focused on Padma with all the intensity he could muster. She began to look gratifyingly uncomfortable.

"Um," said Padma uncharacteristically. She was usually quite eloquent. "Well we, Terry and I, we couldn't help noticing that you left dinner early last night with the new boy. And I remembered that your families are connected, so we were wondering if you could tell us about mal Théa."

Levi let a heavy silence fall, watching the two shift uncomfortably. "Haan," he finally replied before falling silent again.

"Could you elaborate on that?" Padma was frowning now, trying to work out what Levi had been saying 'yes' to.

"Haan," Levi responded dryly, arching an eyebrow at them both. The silence stretched and the two Sixth Years began to look frustrated. Taking pity on them, Levi added, "Yes, I could. But I won't. I don't gossip, Padma," he added reprovably.

"I know, Levi, but that's why we're asking you! It's not gossip from you, it's fact." She leaned forward earnestly, and Levi got the impression that she really believed what she said. After all, fact was extremely important to a Ravenclaw.

"An exchange, then," he said finally, deciding to use the opportunity this gave him. Brie and Uncle Shay would be so proud of him! "Tell me – factually – what the other students think of my cousin, and I will respond – factually – with an equal value of knowledge about him."

"That's fair," Padma nodded at once, though Boot was looking somewhat taken aback. He'd obviously expected the little Third Year to immediately cave to the desires of the older students. Too bad for him. Never underestimate a Defayne.

"Well," she began after a moment of thought, "there's definitely an undercurrent of fear. You might not have heard, but he attacked Draco Malfoy this morning." Levi's raised eyebrows expressed a mix of amused disbelief and curiosity. "Something about Malfoy calling Granger a Mudblood."

Immediately Levi's eyebrows fell and he nodded in understanding. Boot perked up at this and looked anxious to pursue it with questions, but Padma continued.

"Most of us are dead curious," she said with a little smile. "Your cousin acted out a school-wide fantasy by attacking Malfoy like that. We want to know why he did it. It doesn't make a whole lot of sense." Levi interpreted 'we' as 'the other Ravenclaws.'

"There're some really odd rumors going around right now. There's talk of mal Théa being everything from a Death Eater, to a spy for someone, to an undercover French Auror. Everyone's got some wild theory that they back with 'factual' evidence that they heard from so and so, who heard from so and so, etcetera."

"Of course," Levi murmured. "Go on."

"He also stood up to Snape today, and no one's seen him since. It was actually really cool – I was there – and he said something about redeeming the honor of his house. Snape let him, and then gave Gryffindor points, which has also got everyone talking."

"There's two factions," Boot chimed in for the first time. "Half the school thinks mal Théa is buddy buddy with Snape and that they're plotting against us all. The other half thinks they're deadly enemies, and that they have it in for each other."

"What do you think?" Levi asked, curious despite himself.

"Well, I lack sufficient information," Boot hedged, looking away.

"Speculate," Levi instructed mildly. This was fun! Boot continued to look away, unwilling to meet his eyes.

"I think the student body is too extreme," Padma stepped in to save her friend. "But that's gossip for you. Anyways, it's your turn. Why did mal Théa defend Granger like that?"

"Gabriel dislikes discriminatory labels," said Levi. "And his brother-in-law is Muggleborn."

Padma and Boot exchanged surprised looks; evidently whatever research they did on his family tree, they hadn't turned up that bit of information.

"Why did he come here?" Boot asked next.

"To experience English culture and make alliances," Levi replied smoothly. Of course, that wasn't the reason at all, but he couldn't exactly explain to these people that his cousin was actually Harry Potter and was coming to Hogwarts as a tribute to his dead biological parents.

"Right," Boot agreed skeptically. Levi kept his expression blank. "Is he Dark?"

"Are you?" Levi shot back. Boot spluttered, obviously offended, and Levi raised an eyebrow at him.

"That is Gabriel's business, and Gabriel's business alone. Though I suggest you look at the mal Théa records more closely before making further accusations." There, he had told them exactly where they could find the answer if they were smart enough. They were Ravenclaws, so he doubted they would have any trouble following up on his hint.

The mal Théas had an odd history when it came to their Persuasion. As a whole, the family was Neutral. They were loyal to their family above all else. A mal Théa was nearly incapable of betraying another mal Théa – that was just how it was. Even Levi, who was technically twice removed from the family, fell under this blanket of familial loyalty and protection.

Not all mal Théas were Neutral, though. There was a curse of sorts on the family which no one had been able to break during the dozens of generations that had passed. Every generation, one – and only one – mal Théa would not be Neutral. Their Persuasion was

also 'predetermined' after a fashion. If one generation produced a Dark Wizard, the next would produce a Light, and the next a Dark. Over and over, the pattern cycled.

Great Great Aunt H  l  ne had been a Dark Witch who allied herself with Grindewald. Her name was still synonymous with evil in France. 'She's a H  l  ne!' continued to be a wonderful way to deeply offend a Light Witch.

Great Uncle Mauri was a Light Wizard. As Light as they came – he was the Head of the French Aurors, and had made a career out of actively opposing Dark Wizards.

Uncle Shay was a Dark Wizard. Everybody knew that he was allied with the Dark Lord, though no one knew whether or not he had taken Voldemort's Mark. He had often commanded his troops in the Dark Lord's favor during the first war and the Parisian Butcher had a reputation to match Aunt H  l  ne's.

All this was commonly known. A little creative research would unearth the pattern for the examination of the overly curious Ravenclaws. It would show them that, at the most, Brie was Neutral. There was even a possibility that he was a Light wizard, though Levi thought that was unlikely.

In fact, Levi was almost positive that Fae was going to be the Light witch for their generation. He would've felt sorry for Uncle Shay if it hadn't been so ironic. It would serve his Lord Uncle right! It was rather amazing, really, that such a complete bastard could produce a girl like Fae. If she had a bad bone in her body, Levi would eat his Potions book.

The Ravenclaws finished a brief whispered conference, then Padma took a deep breath to ask another question.

"How does Snape know mal Th  a's mom?"

"Auntie Rai is a Potions Mistress," Levi responded promptly, a little smile tugging at his lips. Rai was his favorite adult relative by far, and he had fond childhood memories of observing her in the lab. She was amazingly tolerant of little children under foot, and had only used him as a guinea pig when he was old enough to say yes or no.

"Why did he not want her son in his House?"

Levi blinked. Why wouldn't Snape want Brie in his House? "What do you mean?"

"Snape said, 'I shudder to think of Rai's child in my House.' Why would he say that?" Padma was gifted with near perfect recall, so Levi trusted her phrasing. He let out a breath of laughter – so Snape did have a sense of humor! How charming.

"Auntie Rai is flamboyant, psychotic, and patently incapable of staying out of trouble."

His two unwanted guests exchanged surprised glances. This account of the woman who gave birth to cold, intense, violent Gabriel apparently caught them off guard. Oh well, Rai always said shock is good for the soul.

"I need to get back to work," he added pointedly. "It will take me some time to regain my train of thought." He frowned at them until they stood up. With a quick 'thank you' and 'sorry for bothering you,' they retreated to a different part of the Library. Probably to research his family history.

"(Charming,)" came a voice from behind his shoulder, "(aren't they. I've been putting up with their sort all day.)"

Levi turned to give his cousin an exasperated look. "(I really do need to work, Brie.)"

"(Ah, you can spare some time for me, right baby coz?)" Somewhere along the lines Brie had picked up the ability to say one thing with words and an entirely different thing with his body. So while his voice teased, his body remained alert and poised for some imagined danger.

"(What do you want, Brie? Make it fast, please.)"

"(No respect at all these days. Saraswati smiles on you Levi – a quick hello will not get in the way of,)" he paused to skim the titles on the table, "(Traditional Blood Rituals of Durga? Ritualistic Ceremonies of India? Levi, what in the name of all that is holy are you researching?)"

Levi shrugged. "(Does it matter? I know what I'm doing. Now what do you want?)"

Brie frowned down at him for a moment longer, then shook his head dismissively. "(Snape gave me a book written in Parseltongue. I find myself wondering how it came into his possession and why he gave it to me.)"

Levi's attention was officially caught. "(Well, it's not exactly a secret that you speak that language, Brie. Uncle Shay has had you translate things for him before - everyone knows that someone in our family speaks it.)"

"(Yes, but only we know that I'm the speaker. So how did he know?)"

"(Maybe he doesn't,)" Levi pointed out practically. "(Maybe he means for you to pass it along to someone else.)"

"(Perhaps,)" he sighed. Brie could be a clever bastard, but he was a sixteen year old soldier. Eventually he would be a master of politics, but for the moment certain things still stumped him. Levi found his cousin's confusion extremely entertaining.

"(I'll look into it, coz,)" he said with an easy smile. "(Maybe you ought to write to Uncle Shay?)"

Brie's face cleared and he gave Levi a relieved smile. "(I'll do that. Thanks, Levi. Good luck on your research.)" He bent to drop a kiss on Levi's cheek, then left as silently as he had come.

A/N: Hindi translations:

Naamaste : hello

Aap kaise hain? : how are you?

Bahut acha, shukriya : very well, thank you

Haan : yes

Chapter Eleven: Routine

Dinner passed without incident, though mal Théa remained scarce. Everyone retreated to their common rooms to enjoy a last lazy evening without homework. It was nearly ten before the Gryffindors began to drift upstairs to their beds.

Ron, Dean, Seamus, and Neville got ready for bed with good humor. They threw dirty laundry at each other, cracked bad jokes, and ganged up on Ron about mooning after Hermione. Unlike last night, when mal Théa had a dampening effect on their good moods, tonight they were able to relax. Although they were all curious where their dorm mate had gone off to, everyone seemed happy to just enjoy their time together without the new kid.

They were asleep hours before mal Théa returned to the dorm.

Brie spent the afternoon studying with Levi. Or, more accurately, he spent the afternoon sitting silently with his cousin while they both read. Occasionally they would exclaim over their books, and sometimes this prompted conversation. Several times Parseltongue exclamations from Brie elicited pencils thrown at his head.

The book Snape had given him was fascinating. It was signed by some guy named Salazar, which Brie thought was an odd name, though it sounded mildly familiar when translated into English. A lot of it seemed to be a research journal in which the author jotted down notes in an annoyingly disorganized manner. Some notes made more sense than others, although all Salazar's research was focused on the Dark Arts and Parseltongue magic. Interspersed between study notes were little glimpses of the man and his life. Because much of this expressed strong anti-Muggle opinion, Brie chose largely to ignore it.

He'd come across a passage near the middle that caught his attention, however.

"The others don't seem to understand the threat. By letting filth in we are allowing – nay, we are inviting – a security breach of the worst sort. I tried to explain this to them, but they are not interested in hearing my good sense. I didn't want it to come to this, but there is nothing for it but to take matters into my own hands.

There is a natural underground cavern below the castle that I discovered while laying the pipes. I didn't tell the others because it seemed unimportant at the time. Now I sense keen opportunity.

I have placed a young Basilisk in the cavern with instructions to remain there until I or another who Speaks calls to her. There is an underground outlet into the Forest so that she can hunt; I do not want her attacking before the time is right. Until then, I have placed powerful stasis spells upon her and she will only awaken when she needs to eat. Otherwise, she will sleep until I call.

As messages to my future heirs I have left a number of riddles and clues guiding them to discover my secret chamber and release Tsier."

The entry continued on to wax eloquent on precisely what Salazar intended for his Basilisk. It was mostly complaints on how Muggleborns were worthless and shouldn't be allowed entrance to... wherever it was that he helped to run. He was never very clear on that.

Imagine, though – a hidden chamber with a basilisk! Brie's interest was definitely piqued. He really wanted to know where Snape had found this book. If the Chamber was in Hogwarts itself, Brie wanted to know.

With happy thoughts of very large snakes dancing through his mind, Brie snuck back to the dorm and fell asleep with a smile on his face.

"Défense est une perte de temps" Brie grumbled as he settled into a desk at the back of the room. Hermione shot him an enquiring glance as she sat down beside him.

Yesterday it had just sort of happened that they sat together in every class. He had expected that to change now that they were sharing classes with her friends. Apparently not. He wasn't actually disappointed by this development – after all, she was a very tolerable sort of person.

"Really? I would've thought you of all people would enjoy this class."

Brie turned to look at Hermione with surprise, though he made sure to keep it off his face. "Vous parlez français?"

"Not really," she shrugged, shuffling the books on her desk. "I can understand a little. My parents and I occasionally vacation in France, and I've picked up some words over the years."

Brie was glad he hadn't said anything more sensitive than his opinion of DADA. He'd have to watch what he said around this girl. It was annoying to realize that he didn't actually have a "private" language here. He wasn't sure why he'd assumed no one here would speak French. Plenty of students at Beauxbatons spoke English. With a little creativity, though, he'd be able to work this to his benefit.

"So why do you think DADA is a waste of time?" Hermione asked looking over at him, curiosity written plainly across her face. In front of them, Weasley and Longbottom both turned to face them. Of course they had been eavesdropping.

"It is not practical," Brie informed her after a moment's thought. "This class teaches dueling and controlled curse and counter-curse pairs which are useless in combat."

"How would you know?" asked Weasley.

Brie would've found the redhead's question deeply insulting if the tone hadn't been merely curious. Brie decided not to take offense this time. Next time the boy had better be more careful where he stuck his foot.

"I did not earn my rank by playing battle," replied Brie, lifting his eyebrow.

"But that's just 'cause your uncle is the Parisian Butcher!" The redhead was promptly smacked by a suddenly pale Longbottom and kicked by a blushing Granger. Brie's eyes narrowed and he compressed his lips in annoyance.

"Would you care to try me?" he asked sharply.

The redhead suddenly looked nervous. He licked his lips, looking both ways as if searching for a savior. "Uh," he stalled. "Um..."

"Wonderful," Brie sneered, giving his chin an arrogant jerk. He stood in one smooth motion and walked to the front of the room where a raised dueling platform took the place of the standard teacher's desk and blackboard.

Weasley remained glued to his seat, face white.

The entire class was staring at them with interest now, attention firmly caught. Whispers circulated as other students tried to figure out what was happening. Normally Brie wasn't one for attention or theatrics, but this was just too good an opportunity to waste.

"Well? I was under the impression you wanted to have a go at me." He let his smirk drop off his face, leaving a mask of cold command. This was the face that his soldiers obeyed without question.

"Class will be starting any minute, Gabriel," Longbottom spoke up in his friend's defense. "You don't have time for a duel."

"Duel? Who's planning to duel?" Professor Black stood in the doorway, arms crossed, surveying his class.

Brie's first impression was that he was either going to love or hate this new Professor – there would be no gray area. The man was thin, with sunken cheeks and a slightly hang-dog air about him. His eyes, however, were bright with mischief and intelligence. He wore long hair in a ponytail and wore an odd looking hat at a jaunty angle. He seemed to be inviting his students to take a chance.

"Mr Weasley and I, Professor. He challenged my Honor." He sought and captured the Professor's eyes as he spoke. Professor Black looked extremely curious.

"Very well," the Professor nodded after a moment's staring contest. "Let's see what your year level can do." He grinned, inviting the class to join in his enjoyment of the situation. He earned a few slightly wary smiles, but most people were too busy speculating on the outcome of the confrontation.

Brie did a little jig inside his head. Fight! Fight! He was going to get to fight! Never mind that it was against an untrained boy who probably wouldn't be able to defeat Levi... Beggars, after all, cannot

be choosers. It was hard to keep the manic grin from spreading across his face.

Hermione bit her lip anxiously as Ron walked toward the platform. With each step he seemed to gain more confidence. Hermione hoped that it didn't cloud his judgment. Honestly she didn't know what he was thinking. Against any other schoolboy, Hermione would give Ron even odds. Against a trained soldier?

Hermione didn't know much about combat, but she knew enough about soldiers. Her grandfather was a war veteran, a career military man. Hermione could see a lot of his attitudes in Mal Théa – the bravado, the convicted loyalty, the pig headedness. And her granddad hadn't been trained by a terrorist. What was Ron thinking?

Professor Black walked over to the referee's box on the other side of the dueling platform as the two boys got ready to duel. Ron had pulled out his wand and was twirling it in his fingers, trying to look impressive. Mal Théa shrugged off his outer robe, then waited. He stood there silently, completely still, hands empty by his sides. He'd left his cane at the edge of the platform, but it didn't seem to make a difference in the way he moved and balanced.

"Alright boys, keep it legal and keep it temporary. Winner is the first to disable their opponent. Ready?" Both boys nodded and the Professor paused for dramatic effect. "Go!"

Ron was obviously expecting a quick attack, as he immediately ducked and shouted "Expelliarmus!"

Mal Théa simply raised an eyebrow as the spell passed over his shoulder to hit the wall.

"Stupefy! Tarantallegra! Expelliarmus! Rictusempra! Expelliarmus!" Ron seemed to be getting a little flustered as his opponent continued to move only enough to let the spells fly past him harmlessly. "Reducto! Come on, fight!"

Apparently Mal Théa had been waiting for this invitation, as the second it was issued he whirled into action. Hermione held her breath. He slid around another series of uninspired curses from Ron, coming up barely an arms length from the surprised redhead. In a series of movements almost too quick to follow, Mal Théa pinned

Ron to the floor. By the time Hermione's brain had caught up, he was calmly inspecting the other boy's wand, left leg pressed firmly across Ron's throat.

"Do you yield?" He inquired in a bored tone.

Ron banged one of his hands against the floor. Mal Théa seemed to consider that a 'yes,' and stood. Ron continued to lie on the floor, struggling to catch his breath. Mal Théa silently handed Ron's wand to the Professor before putting his robes back on and returning to his seat.

Sirius was impressed. He'd been expecting a schoolboy fight of the sort he and James used to have with Snape, not... whatever that had been. It wasn't a display, exactly, but it definitely carried the message that the boy was not to be messed with. Imagine, doing all that without drawing a wand! It would be interesting to see what the boy could do when he was armed.

Weasley was just struggling to his feet, rubbing his neck with a wry expression. Sirius wordlessly handed back his wand and watched him shuffle to his seat. He was more than a little curious as to what had spurred the argument – Mal Théa had mentioned an insult to Honor, but not even the Malfoys really paid attention to that sort of thing anymore.

Mal Théa was officially a mystery, and if there was one thing Sirius Black couldn't stand, it was mysteries. The boy was obviously a Pureblood of the most Traditional sort, and old fashioned – really, a cane? Those hadn't been in fashion for years except by the older generation.

He also seemed to hold the rules in just as high a regard as Sirius himself, which was to say not at all. How had he managed to get away without wearing his uniform? The Marauders had tried countless times but had never gotten away with so much as switching up the color scheme. And dueling outside the parameters of class? When the teacher could come in at any moment? That was downright arrogant.

Sirius really liked this kid.

The only thing that bothered him was when he had first walked into the classroom and those cold green eyes had caught his gaze. It had been like getting pulled into an icy furnace; a paradox of passion and cool good sense.

They had been Lily's eyes, transfused with anger over the Marauder's treatment of Snape.

They had been Lily's eyes, burning with creative energy as she played with Charms.

They had been Lily's eyes, gleaming with mischief as she out-marauded the Marauders.

They had been Lily's eyes, cold with death.

Sirius had met his fair share of green eyes, of course. Mal Théa's resemblance to Lily wasn't so much the color of their eyes as the range of emotion they expressed. As stoic as mal Théa tried to appear, his emotions blazed in his eyes. Lily had been the same way. Seeing his dead friend in this boy... that bothered Sirius more than he cared to admit.

Like all their other classes, the rest of Defense was spent with an explanation of how the year would work. Professor Black was likeable and seemed blessed with an endless abundance of energy. He stalked around the room, jumped up onto the platform, and even hopped up onto the students' desks to take a brief stroll.

At the very end, seeing as there was a good fifteen minutes left and he had nothing more to say, he invited the class to discuss the duel they had witnessed at the beginning of the period.

"Mr. mal Théa and Mr. Weasley, please come up to the front of the room. Thank you."

The two boys did as they were told. Ron's ears were burning, though otherwise he looked decently calm. Mal Théa was as cool and collected as ever as he sat down cross-legged on the dueling platform. It was high enough that he could still see and be seen easily. After a moment's hesitation, Ron gingerly sat down beside him.

"Let's start with the opening of the duel. Anyone care to comment? Yes, Miss MacDougal."

"Weasley was expecting an attack, but it didn't come," Morag observed with a frown of concentration. "He wanted to start on the offensive, so he ducked instead of casting a shield, and that threw off his aim."

Ron blushed slightly while beside him mal Théa fixed a blank stare on Morag.

"Exactly!" Black beamed at her. "10 points to Ravenclaw. Was this good strategy, or bad strategy? Mr. Goldstein."

"Bad," Anthony drawled. "It failed, didn't it?"

A few students laughed.

"Ah," the Professor smiled in a slightly mysterious sort of way. "But I didn't ask whether or not it worked. I asked if it was good strategy. Yes, Mr. Thomas."

"Good? Because if mal Théa had attacked, Ron would've avoided the spell and still been able to cast?"

"Are you asking? Or telling."

"Telling, sir," Dean replied.

"Does anyone disagree with Mr. Thomas?" Professor Black pressed. Obviously he hadn't found the answer he wanted yet. Hermione frowned slightly, replaying the short duel over in her mind. "Miss Granger."

"Yes sir. It was bad strategy, because mal Théa hadn't drawn his wand yet, so he wouldn't have been able to cast the first spell anyways." The boy in question had the audacity to look mildly amused.

The professor nodded slowly, giving Hermione a warm smile. "Good observation – no, Mr. mal Théa had not yet drawn his wand. In fact, he never drew his wand. 5 points to Gryffindor. Now, for the sake of

argument, let us say that Mr. mal Théa had drawn his wand. Was Mr. Weasley's strategy good or bad?"

The silence stretched out for a long moment as they all considered the duel. Finally mal Théa spoke.

"Good strategy, but improperly executed. An experienced dueler would've lunged to the side and come up rolling. Such a dueler would already have calculated the distance and velocity of his momentum and would be able to compensate for it in any spells he threw during and after the movement."

"That's impossible!" Anthony sneered, followed immediately by a chorus of agreement. Ron looked grateful for this show of support. Hermione pursed her lips.

Professor Black looked interested and waved the class silent. "Could you demonstrate this for us, Mr. mal Théa?"

Instead of replying, the French student stood and turned toward the wall. He conjured a small handkerchief on the wall, presumably to use as a target, then stood in that same still stance he'd used when dueling Ron.

"Go," Professor Black announced suddenly.

Immediately he was moving. He dove to one side, rolled, and came up in a crouch, his wand aimed at the handkerchief.

A handkerchief that now sported three precise burn marks that had not been there before.

Professor Black clapped in delight as the students ogled mal Théa as if he had just grown a second head. The boy wonder seemed oblivious as he stood from his crouch and moved back to sit beside Ron.

"Excellent, Mr. mal Théa. 15 points to Gryffindor! I've seen Aurors struggle to execute that move as neatly as you just did." Black turned back to the class with a Cheshire grin. "Impossible, you say?" His face suddenly took on a serious visage. "Always assume that your opponent is meaner, smarter, stronger, and faster than you."

The Aurors' third rule of combat is to never underestimate someone you are fighting against. Yes, Miss Patil."

"But mal Théa never drew his wand – isn't that underestimating Weasley?"

"Not at all," mal Théa inserted smoothly. "That was confidence."

Hermione frowned and she noticed Dean and Seamus scowl at the glib arrogance. In front of her, Neville smothered a chuckle.

"He was proving a point," Anya Rzaeva spoke up for the first time. "It would defeat his purpose to be anything less than confident."

Padma opened her mouth to retort, but the bell cut her off. Instantly the room was awash with excited conversation. Hermione and Neville exchanged a glance before slipping out the door with the rest of their classmates.

The duel had been even more depressing than Brie anticipated. Honestly, Weasley had the aim and the creativity of a small worm, and that was just plain sad. He'd been expecting the boy to be able to provide some sort of challenge – he hadn't even needed to draw his wand!

"Nice duel. A bit short, though."

Brie quirked a smile at the Russian girl and offered his arm. With an answering smile, she let her hand rest near the crook of his elbow as they walked slowly toward the Great Hall for lunch.

"I'm afraid I'm a bit out of practice," he apologized airily, earning an amused snort.

"One would hardly think it with the tales of your reign of terror."

"Rain of terror? I didn't know I was raining. Why don't people ever think to tell me these things?"

This time he earned an outright laugh, to his smug pleasure.

"We are terribly remiss for keeping you in the dark about your diabolic plans to take over the world. I apologize most sincerely, Monsieur Gabriel."

"Apology accepted, Mademoiselle Anya – at least now I know about my plans before I accidentally put them into effect. That might've been slightly awkward."

"Indeed," Anya commented dryly, a little smile hovering on her lips. "So tell me what you think of Hogwarts thus far."

Brie sat at the Ravenclaw table for lunch, holding an animated conversation with Anya and Levi. There was a bubble of personal space around them, mostly because Brie had taken to glaring at anyone who dared come too close. As with most conversations between mal Théas, this one had a tendency to drift between various languages.

Anya had been absolutely delighted to discover that Levi was proficient in Russian, though he couldn't follow fast-paced conversation in the language. Brie knew a bit of conversational Russian, but not enough to really follow the other two when they drifted into Anya's native tongue. He was pleased with how well they got along, though he regretted not knowing more Russian. Who knew what they could be plotting!

Classes after lunch were nowhere near as interesting as Defense, which surprised Brie. Transfigurations was typical, though he earned a brief scolding for being out of uniform. He nodded contritely at the time, but he had no intention of changing. Ancient Runes was a bit more promising, but likely to require actual work.

As it turned out, he and the Granger girl were the only Gryffindors in the class. Instead of desks, the chairs were clustered around tables. Where you sat on the first day was where you would be stuck for the rest of the year.

Brie had taken a seat next to Blaise, and Granger had perforce sat with them. They had quickly been joined by Anya, and Brie entertained himself by introducing her to Blaise and Granger. Daphne tried to join them, but Blaise had politely informed her that the fifth seat was already claimed. Draco had waltzed through the door moments before the bell rang and settled into the last available

seat – the one beside Blaise – before noticing who else was in his group. He spent the rest of class trying not to look like he'd been sucking on lemons.

Immediately after lessons, Brie escorted Anya to the Library where they hunted down Levi. As expected, the little Third Year had sequestered himself away in his back corner. They spent a pleasant few hours studying together.

Dinner that night was much as it had been the very first night and was an in-and-out exercise for Brie. He kept conversation to a minimum, utilizing his blank stare whenever his Housemates seemed to muster enough courage to broach a question. He retreated back to the Library as soon as he had finished eating.

And that was the beginning of a wonderful routine.

A/N: Alright, because I know this is going to occur to at least one person: No, this will not be Harry/Anya.

I hope you all enjoyed that chapter! After this time will be passing a lot faster; Harry's routine is set now.

p.s. I do know the difference between "reign" and "rain." Harry, whose first language was English but who stopped speaking it regularly around 7 or 8, misinterpreted what Anya said – the silly boy really did think she meant "rain" as in "precipitation." He was somewhat confused, which is why he made a joke about it.

Chapter Twelve: Surprises

The halls were silent. They might even be called ominous, oppressing, depressing, or any other of a score of suitable atmosphere-setting adjectives.

He thought they were just a tad drafty.

A loud clank echoed through the halls, and with a silent curse he slipped into an alcove. Nothing happened. False alarm. Cautiously he resumed his path. Whoever had the bright idea of sticking animated suits of armor in the halls ought to be taken out and Avadaed.

Thankfully the trip was not overly long. With the maps and the multiple hints he'd come across in the past week, he figured he would have no problem gaining entrance. Soon, he would unleash hell.

The weeks following Brie's duel with Weasley passed quietly. Classes were, for the most part, boring and the teachers were, to put it kindly, all a bit odd. Professor Flitwick squeaked, but otherwise seemed competent. Professor Binns wasn't worth mentioning. Professor Sprout was just a little too motherly and nurturing for Brie's taste.

Professor McGonagall was inclined to raise a fuss about his uniform, so he'd taken to buttoning his robes up in her class and avoiding her in the halls. The other professors took points when they saw him, but the amount was negligible and he made a point of earning back the same number of points during class so that his housemates couldn't complain.

To make life more difficult, Professor Black had taken an interest in him. So far he'd responded by being as cold and dismissive as possible, but it only seemed to encourage the older man's curiosity. Still, it could only be a matter of time before Black gave up and let him be.

Potions wasn't much better, but at least Professor Snape was sardonically amusing. As Brie had foreseen, Snape demanded consistently superior work from him. On one occasion he had even put a slip of paper on Brie's desk that mandated a completely

different potion than the one the rest of the class was brewing. It was getting irritating. Brie would much prefer to skate through his classes without putting in any extra effort.

The rumor mill had finally slowed down, and he was mostly left alone by his peers. This suited Brie very well, and he did his best not to attract anymore undue attention. Unfortunately this meant no more fighting, but a person couldn't have everything.

Weekends turned out to be even better here than they had been at Beauxbatons. There was an entire forest here, after all. He could disappear after class on Friday and show up again late Sunday afternoon, happily exhausted. So far no one had noticed his extended absences.

Levi, of course, refused all invitations to join his weekend excursions, which was why Brie was currently in the Library attempting to convince his scholarly little cousin to go flying.

"(Come on, Levi!)" Brie tried a new approach, leaning across the desk toward his cousin. "(Too much studying rots your brain.)"

"(That's illogical,)" said Levi, still not looking up from his book. "(If you want to go flying, go right ahead. I need to finish my thesis on historical politics in the Riviera.)"

"(Historical politics in...)" Brie narrowed his eyes. He wasn't surprised that Uncle Claudius had asked Levi to do some side research, but this was getting ridiculous. "(Alright, Levi. That's it. You're going to come fly with me of your own free will or so help me I will pick you up and carry you to the Pitch.)"

"(You wouldn't dare,)" Levi snapped, though he sounded a bit nervous. Brie had done it before, though that had been in the privacy of mal Théa manor.

"(Are you coming?)" Brie offered one of the two brooms to Levi. Levi scowled. Brie shrugged.

Without giving the younger boy a chance to protest, he scooped him up out of his chair, tossed him across one broad shoulder and proceeded to march toward the Quidditch Pitch. Levi let out a muffled cry as he was manhandled. He was too dignified to scream,

though he began pounding on Brie's back, demanding to be let down immediately.

Brie only shifted him for a better grip.

The pair garnered some extremely odd looks as they made their way through the school. Levi gave up struggling when Brie reached the first set of staircases, and was silent throughout the rest of the journey. Brie hoped he wasn't plotting revenge.

When they reached the Pitch, Levi seemed fully prepared to pout in the corner. Brie had other ideas and, with multiple threats and a few bribes, he managed to get the younger boy up in the air.

Of course once he was in the air, Brie made sure he had a wonderful time.

Brie had always loved flying. Once Uncle Shay had seen how good he was, he'd been trained to lead the cavalry. In the air, the weakness of his legs didn't matter. He'd become the best combat flyer his uncle had ever seen.

Of course, with Levi there was no practicing battle formations. When he was with his cousins, Brie was able to simply take joy in flight. They chased each other around the Pitch, Levi on the better broom just to make things a bit more even. They played tag, tossed a transfigured ball around, and generally had as much fun as they could.

"(See, that wasn't so bad,)" Brie grinned down at his breathless cousin as they walked back toward the castle, brooms on their shoulders.

"(It could've been worse,)" Levi grudgingly agreed. "(But now I'm a whole afternoon behind.)"

"(You, little coz, are a workaholic. I hate to be the one to tell you this, but nobody cares about historical politics in the Riviera.)"

"(My Lord Grandfather cares, Gabriel,)" Levi returned stiffly. Brie stifled the urge to roll his eyes and groan as they entered the castle.

"(Uncle Claudius does not intend for you to sequester yourself away in the Library for the duration of your stay at Hogwarts, coz. The whole point of sending you here was to make alliances, not write about politics. Forget alliances, Leverett, you don't even have friends!)"

"(That's rich, coming from you,)" Levi snarled, hurt evident in his voice. "(All you do is pick fights and bother me!)" He thrust his broom back into Brie's hands and whirled around, storming off toward the Ravenclaw dorm. Brie scowled. Well, that went swimmingly.

Ron looked up in surprise as mal Théa entered the common room, glaring malevolently. This was surprising for two reasons. One, mal Théa was never in the common room in the afternoon. Two, mal Théa didn't glare. When he wasn't being neutral or blank, he was icy or scary – but Ron had never seen him glare.

The redhead watched as the French boy disappeared up into their dorm clutching two brooms. Five minutes later he was back, brooms exchanged for his book bag. Ron watched him settle into a corner and begin doing homework, practically radiating anger and disgruntlement.

Ron turned his attention back to his chess match with Dean. As long as mal Théa kept to himself, everything was good.

He moved his knight as he reflected on the first day of DADA. He could grudgingly – and privately – admit that he might've deserved what he'd gotten with that little mockery of a duel. Yes, he was embarrassed as hell about it. Yes, he would rather it hadn't happened in front of Hermione. Yes, the transfer student gave him the willies. And yes, he'd asked for it.

Before and after the incident, mal Théa just sort of ignored him. He sort of ignored everybody, actually. It had occurred to Ron that, just maybe, mal Théa wasn't as bad as all that. After all, introverted and homicidal were two different character traits. With that periphery thought, Ron refocused his attention on the game. He'd almost lost a bishop while his thoughts were wandering.

A half hour later, Ron crowed delightedly as won against Dean. Again.

"Checkmate!" Ron struck a victory pose. "Ha ha! I am the chess king! Bow down to the chess king! Woo hoo!"

Dean groaned and Seamus threw a pillow at his head, but Ron only laughed. He'd just won a mini-tournament among Gryffindor House – not that anyone was horribly surprised – and he felt he'd earned the right to celebrate. The other players owed him a Sickle each.

"Oi, mal Théa!" He was feeling bold and undefeatable. Ignoring the black cloud that seemed to hover around the other sixteen year old and ignoring previous interactions, he grinned at the dark skinned boy.

Mal Théa looked up from his books and raised an eyebrow.

"Up for a round of chess?" Ron wasn't really expecting the boy to take him up on it, so he was somewhat taken aback when mal Théa actually appeared to think about it.

"Very well," mal Théa agreed, making his way over to join Ron by the fire. Ron took a deep breath and began thinking of ways to make the most of the situation. This was a chance to finally talk with the transfer student.

"So, mal Théa, want to wager something on the game?" he asked as he began setting up the board.

"Like what?" mal Théa looked genuinely interested.

"How about one question. The loser has to truthfully answer any one question asked by the winner." Ron had been dying to know about that stupid cane ever since the Sorting Feast. He also wanted to know why mal Théa's leg didn't feel like a leg.

"Mmm. Very well, but we agree on the questions now."

"Sounds fair enough," Ron smiled and cracked his knuckles.

"I would ask you who the three most powerful students in this school are."

Ron was somewhat surprised by the question, but supposed mal Théa probably wasn't overly interested in his personal information.

"Alright. And I wanna know what the hell is up with your cane." He threw mal Théa a lopsided grin – after what had happened last time he had accidentally insulted the guy, he would really rather be safe than sorry.

Mal Théa frowned but nodded his agreement. The boys fell silent, concentrating on the game. It began slowly as they tested each other's actions and reactions. Fifteen minutes in, Ron had apparently managed to suitably impress mal Théa as the game began to pick up speed and intensity.

Mal Théa was good. Very good. Almost as good as he was, the redhead was beginning to suspect. Accustomed to playing against people who could barely keep up with him, it was Ron's turn to sweat. Of course, he made sure that mal Théa had to work for any advantage.

The game lasted just under two hours, and at the end of it both boys were bent over the board, eyes bright with the challenge.

"Checkmate," mal Théa announced, leaning back with a sigh.

Ron let out a whoosh of breath. He wasn't overly upset about his loss. In fact, it was actually rather nice to finally meet someone who could give him a run for his money. The game had been extremely close all the way up to the end. If they ever played again – and Ron fervently hoped they would – he was pretty sure he would be able to win the next game.

"Good game, mal Théa," he smiled.

"You too."

"Right. Powerful people," Ron muttered, remembering their wager. Most people wouldn't ask his opinion on such things – he wasn't generally considered the most observant boy in the world. But if Hogwarts were a game of chess...

"I'd say Draco Malfoy, bastard though he is, Kirsten Sveinsdóttir, 2nd Year Ravenclaw, and Jaime O'Brien, 7th Year Hufflepuff."

Mal Théa nodded slowly, then rose. "You are a good opponent, Weasley. I hope we play again soon."

Ron blinked in surprise. "Er, yeah. Yeah! That would be really cool. And, er, mal Théa?" he added awkwardly. "You can just call me Ron. Everyone does."

Mal Théa gave another nod before turning to head back over to his own spot. He paused before he'd taken more than a few steps.

"The cane was an unsolicited but necessary gift," mal Théa informed him abruptly. The cane in question tapped the boy's left leg with a muted clang. Ron's eyebrows shot up. Oh! How interesting. He'd love to hear the story behind that.

"And Ron? My name is Gabriel." With that, the French boy returned to his corner and his homework, leaving a bemused redhead sitting in front of a low chessboard.

"(Where's Brie? He asked me to help him with his Runes homework.)" Anya kept her Russian slow and clear so that Levi could follow it easily.

"(He is not coming,)" Levi responded tightly, not looking up from his work as Anya joined him.

"(Oh dear,)" she murmured, giving him a vaguely amused look. "(Fighting, are we? What happened?)"

"Other than him manhandling me? Or his general disrespect for my priorities? Or his hypocritical insistence that he knows better?" Levi was nearly snarling, trying to summon enough anger to keep the hurt out of his voice. It almost worked.

"Manhandling you?" Anya mirrored her friend's switch to English. "I will need an explanation for that one, I think. As for the other two, well, it has been my admittedly limited experience that this is just Brie's attitude, and we must resign ourselves to it."

Levi growled and proceeded to bury himself in his books. Anya watched him with a mix of amusement and concern. She had never seen the two cousins fight. In fact, they seemed almost unnaturally

close most of the time. Deciding to give the boys some time, she got out her own books and began to work on her Divination homework.

It took Levi and Brie two days to get over their differences. Afterwards it was as though nothing had happened, much to Anya's bemusement. She got the story out of them eventually and had to laugh at the idea of Levi being carried like a sack of potatoes. She extracted a promise that next time they would take her flying too.

Brie sat at the breakfast table calmly sipping a cup of very strong Turkish coffee. According to Levi, it had taken the elves a few tries to get it right back when he was a First Year, but by now they had mastered the art. It was times like these that Brie was especially grateful to his cousin.

Croissants and fruit had also begun to turn up near Brie during breakfast, which delighted him. He would have to figure out a way to thank the creatures – fresh blueberries and Turkish coffee were enough to make anybody a morning person.

Suddenly a piercing shriek came from the other end of the Gryffindor Table. The sound was quickly accompanied by a few other excitable people taking up the cry. Soon the Hall was filled with the babble of an agitated student body. Brie took another sip of his coffee as the hubbub rose around him.

"Attention!" McGonagall's voice echoed through the room. Everyone turned to stare at the Headmaster, who stood calmly at his place.

"Everyone, please calm down," McGonagall's voice continued as the Headmaster spoke. "Don't panic. Our pranksters will be duly reprimanded and a remedy shall be found. Until then, please return to your meals. Thank you."

"Ugh! I thought we were through with this pranking nonsense!" Brie turned to look in the direction of Ron's voice. He suppressed a smile at the sight of an irritated, ranting Hermione. "How on earth are we supposed to concentrate in classes today?"

Neville, currently blessed with Ginny's sweeter tones, mumbled something about nightmares and sleep deprivation. Ron concurred, Hermione's normally articulate voice sounding odd when mixed with the redhead's common slang. Across the room, Parkinson's voice

proved to be piercingly soprano as it soared under the direction of a somewhat frantic Draco Malfoy.

Brie caught Levi's eye and winked slightly. It was a success. Levi just shook his head and turned to whisper something to Anya – probably in her voice. Brie joined in the speculation, completely unembarrassed by his own borrowed voice. He would send his mother a thank you note in the afternoon.

Hermione took her seat next to mal Théa, shuffling through her bag to find her DADA notes. Professor Black had hinted there would be some sort of review test today and she was slightly anxious about it. Defense definitely wasn't her best class, though she still had almost perfect scores in the subject. She just wasn't all that great at the practical side.

The Professor strolled into class a breath after the bell rang, eyes bright with excitement. From what Hermione had seen of the man, paperwork wasn't inclined to make him happy – which meant that whatever they would be doing, it would probably be practical. Darn.

"Alright everyone, clear off your desks!" Professor Black had a manic sort of smile plastered on his face and he was literally bouncing on the balls of his feet. Hermione reluctantly did as she was told, while beside her Gabriel looked intrigued.

"We're going to be doing a review of some of the things you've learned over the years. We'll start out with a bit of theory and work through a few common Dark Creatures. And for the end of class, I've found you a boggart!"

Hermione was so busy groaning at this announcement that she failed to notice her companion turn abruptly pale.

A/N: Two brief notes for this chapter:

That first scene? Yeah, that was Brie sneaking into the kitchens to put his prank into action. (yes, his prank.) In case the prank itself was confusing, basically it switched people's voices with a nearby member of the opposite sex. Also, it wore off before Defense class, so they have their voices back to normal.

And about Ron; he's a bit more observant than people give him credit for. Not having Harry as a best friend has altered him a bit, but I'm still trying to keep him as canon as possible. No, he is not going to suddenly become Brie's best friend. That would be silly. But he isn't an idiot, either. (at least, not usually.) Real people aren't like that. About noticing the legs – remember that it was Brie's left leg that pinned him down after their duel, and it is Brie's left leg that is currently incased in a metal brace

Chapter Thirteen: Boggarts and Tea Parties

Brie glared meaninglessly at the professor when his name was called. He hated boggarts. He wasn't a coward by any means, but he avoided certain stimuli like the plague. He hadn't been subjected to a flashback since a particularly misguided prank a year ago had reduced him to a quivering mass of nerves. He really did not need his new schoolmates seeing him like that.

To be honest, he didn't even know what his boggart would be anymore.

The last time he'd come across one, he had been twelve. He'd been attending a Defense class at Beauxbatons and had never even heard of the creatures before. When he had gone up, already a Captain and already convinced of his invincibility, he had been unprepared for what had followed.

The giant snake of a previous student had swollen and grown and turned into a huge purple faced giant who advanced murderously on Brie. All Brie had been able to do was flinch and shudder and curl into the fetal position.

The professor, highly disconcerted by the development, had banished the boggart and tried to approach him. When she touched him, he had whimpered, muttering "It'll be good! Please don't hurt the Freak, please, please, it's sorry!"

After that incident – which proved he wasn't quite as over his childhood as he'd like to think – his big sister had decided to try something a bit different. She called it "facing your fears and Crucioing them until they shit all the scary stuff out."

Ami took Brie to visit Dursley in prison. He'd been surprised by how small the man was; he wasn't the giant of his nightmares, just a normal sized human, though still grossly overweight. Dursley had recognized Ami's strong resemblance to Rai – deliberately accentuated by the 18 year old choosing to wear a sari to the meeting – and it put the fear of God in him from the very beginning. When he guessed who Brie was, however, he tried to reestablish dominance.

Following Ami's calm coaching, he had Crucioed the Muggle until there was nothing left to fear.

Certain things still affected him badly, though. Even now, certain phrases could send him into cold tremors or cause him to become militantly antisocial. He was still affected by his childhood, but Vernon Dursley no longer terrified him.

So what would his boggart be?

Albus Dumbledore prided himself on knowing everything about everyone in his school. He knew the basic facts about all the First Years, and by their Second Year he knew what made them tick.

He hated this exchange program.

Oh, he got to screen the new students, of course, but it was nothing like overseeing their formative years. He had no handle on the foreigners, and in his mind that spelled potential disaster. Were they good children? He didn't know. What was their Persuasion? He didn't know. Did they come from stable situations? He didn't know.

He knew some people disagreed with him about the proper jurisdiction for a Headmaster, but he'd always firmly believed in being part of the children's lives. You never knew what could be prevented or saved with a little informed intervention – just look at Tom Riddle and Harry Potter!

These transfer students, though... He had their grades and their permanent files with detention records and the like, but he knew little about the children themselves. He was sorely tempted to just invite them all to tea.

Take Melisande Rousseau, for example. No one in Hogwarts had a single negative thing to say about her, period. Even the Gryfindors had only nice things to say about the beautiful French Slytherin. However, in her record there were several incidences of her purposefully harming other students, and even of her killing a rival's pet when she was twelve. Apparently there had been some sort of mitigating circumstances, but he had no idea what they were. All he knew was the bare bones and that Madam Maxime gave her personal assurance that the girl was safe to allow into his school.

Or take Nicolai Mozarov from Durmstrang. His record was spotless. According to the paperwork, the boy had never had so much as a detention. His twin sister, on the other hand, was a delinquent with a propensity for starting fires. He had an older brother in Azkaban with the Dark Mark on his arm and another sister in a Russian insane asylum. Yet the boy was a Hufflepuff, and Dumbledore knew nothing else about him.

Gabriel mal Théa was just as worrisome as the other two. The boy had had very irregular schooling up until now. Apparently he'd rarely attended classes except to sit Year End exams. He was a below average student, though he got compliments for the practical aspects of his work. He was highly influenced by his uncle, a man everyone knew was a Very Dark Wizard, and his sister, whose formidable reputation was well known in the Healer community. The rumor mill had churned for weeks about the boy – some of the rumors caught even the Headmaster by surprise.

Anya Rzaeva, on the other hand, seemed to be a decent sort of girl, for all her sternness. She was from an old Traditionalist line and had been raised by her grown sister after her mother died in an accident. The girl was fantastically bright, spoke several languages, and was probably destined to be some arrogant Pureblood's trophy wife, which was a pity.

Arranged marriage was a sin, especially among children: it was a pity the Traditionalists disagreed. At least here Dumbledore had the power to guarantee the children of Hogwarts were graduated before they were forced to wed. These transfer students, though... Both French children were married, though they were only in the second stage. Mozarov's records listed him as betrothed, and only Rzaeva did not have a prior claim.

Maybe inviting them all to tea was a good idea. It would be easy enough to disguise the true reason with simply wanting to make sure they were settling in all right. Yes, that was a good idea. He would send them all invitations right now.

Hermione stared at the glaring French boy. Wasn't he going to take his turn? He was a Gryffindor! He should face his fear. How out of character – he seemed the type to not be afraid of anything. Well, either that or the type to not want anyone to know what it was that he feared, which was really a rather Slytherin attitude.

After a brief staring contest with Professor Black, Gabriel stepped forward. Seamus's banshee faded to be replaced by the dead body of a young girl, no more than 11. She had probably been very beautiful once, but she had been mutilated beyond any recognition. Hermione gagged.

Gabriel was pale as he stared down at the boggart. "Riddikulus," he murmured listlessly.

The boggart shimmered, but rather than disappearing, it simply changed forms. Now the corpse of a young woman dressed in the tattered remains of Healer's robes lay in a pool of blood. It looked as though every bone in her body had been broken, and she lay splayed across the floor like a macabre doll.

"Ri-riddikulus."

The corpse shimmered, only to be replaced by the body of a young boy. He looked vaguely familiar, though Hermione didn't care to try and figure out why. Another Riddikulus returned them to the beautiful, broken girl-child and Hermione had to turn away to keep from being sick.

She stared at Gabriel, fascinated by his reaction and willing to focus on anything to distract her from the boggart. Gabriel wouldn't – or couldn't – look away. He stared down at the corpse with an odd, empty expression on his face. He did not say Riddikulus again.

It was Rzaeva who broke the tableau. Hurrying forward in a swirl of skirts, she stepped between Gabriel and the boggart. She firmly forced the resulting chimera to submit, though the class was still too shaken up to laugh. Turning back to the French boy, she put a hand on either side of his face and forced him to meet her eyes. She began murmuring in Russian, her voice soft and comforting even if Hermione couldn't understand what she was saying.

Galvanized into action, Professor Black forced the boggart back into the crate. Cautiously he offered the boy some chocolate. Gabriel ate it under Rzaeva's direction without seeming to be aware that he was doing it.

"Who were they?" Hermione whispered queasily.

"The older woman was his sister Naomi," Neville whispered back, looking like he, too, was ready to throw up. Those children had been brutalized and tortured to death. "The boy was a Defayne – he's a third year here. A cousin. I... don't know who the other girl was." The girl who had made the biggest impact on the normally stoic, controlled soldier.

Professor Black dismissed them, instructing them all to eat the chocolate he had passed around. He murmured something to Gabriel, but the boy shook his head. Linking arms with Rzaeva, he left, leaning heavily on his cane and suddenly looking much older than 16.

Hermione, for her part, was anxious to get to the warmth and comfort of the common room. It was Tuesday, so they had a free hour before their next class. She was anxious to spend it wrapped in a big hug with her friends.

She had noticed that the fears of her classmates had matured along with them. Some still had the same fears, of course – Ron was still terrified of spiders, for example – but many of them had changed, including her own. No one else's greatest fear had been the dead bodies of brutalized children. Whatever had inspired Gabriel's fear, it certainly made her heart go out to him.

"Excuse me Professor, but could I borrow Defayne? There's an emergency."

Professor McGonagall grudgingly nodded toward the slightly frazzled looking sixth year. Curious and concerned, Levi gathered his books and followed Anya out into the hall. As soon as they rounded the corner, she broke into a run.

"What is it?" he panted as they jogged toward the grounds.

"Defense," she responded shortly. "We faced boggarts."

Swearing mentally, Levi ran faster. Brie and boggarts did not mix. If he'd managed to trigger a relapse here of all places, there would be hell to pay. If it was bad enough that they required outside assistance, well, Brie would either die of mortification or would go on a homicidal rampage. Shiva save them all.

Anya led him to a small copse of trees a little ways from the castle. It was a good choice; private, but in the sun and the fresh air. Brie sat straight backed on the edge of the shade, cloak ignored beside him despite the chilly day.

Levi tugged Anya into a stop a little ways beyond the trees to catch their breath. They continued at a less alarming and potentially suicidal pace.

"Cousin?" he murmured gently in Hindi, cautiously kneeling beside the blank teenager. "Brie, it's Levi."

Brie continued to not notice him, staring out over the lake as if something out there held all his answers. With a sigh, Levi wrapped his cloak around the broad shoulders and turned to Anya. This could take a while.

"What is it that he saw?"

"The first time it was a little girl, maybe eleven. She had... terrible things done to her," Anya whispered, and Levi got the impression that Brie was not the only one affected by the sight.

"Fae," he murmured, his own face tightening in pain. Oh Kali, poor Brie.

"The second time, it was an older girl. A woman. Green cowled robes, and... Similar things. were done to. her."

"Ami," he closed his eyes and took a fortifying breath.

"The... third time. It... you. It was you." Anya was staring at him with slightly haunted eyes, and if she had been a mal Théa, Levi would've given her a hug. As it was, he reached out and squeezed her hand.

"He tried, one more time. It was the little girl again, and then he stopped. He just... stared down at her. It was horrible, Levi. How could anyone even imagine that done to children?" She was crying now, her arms wrapped around herself in a vain attempt to be comforted.

"Brie had a very harsh childhood," Levi told her softly, reaching out to rub her shoulder. "He does not like to talk about it, but he can imagine some very ghastly things."

"Who was that girl who was so important to him?"

"Fae?" Levi gave her a pained smile. "Fae is our cousin. She is the best girl in the world, a really special kid. Brie is fiercely protective of her – she means the world to him."

He offered Anya a handkerchief, and she accepted it with a watery thank you. Leaving her to collect herself, he turned back to the issue of his cousin. Brie was in a state of shock, but he didn't appear to be in a flashback. Thank Merlin for small favors. Levi could deal with shock just fine.

Moving behind his cousin, he wrapped skinny arms around the boy's shoulders and began murmuring softly to him in Hindi.

"(Oi! Gabriel! Wait up, you great lump!)"

Brie turned to see Rousseau hurrying to catch up with him. He was on his way to tea with the Headmaster and he wasn't overly surprised that Melisande was headed in the same direction. At least he wouldn't be alone with the Headmaster. That was worth something at least.

"(The Headmaster invited you to tea?)"

"(Yeah,)" said Rousseau, smiling up at him as he matched her smaller stride. "(Do you know what he wants?)"

"(No. If I knew, I wouldn't be going. Damn my genetic curiosity.)"

"(So the soldier does have a sense of humor. Surprise, surprise. Aren't you going to offer me your arm?)"

Brie complied and escorted the talkative Rousseau up to the Headmaster's office for tea and biscuits. Anya and Mozarov were already present when they arrived, and Brie was quick to pull out a seat for Melisande next to the blonde, leaving him free to sit by his friend.

The old man was twinkling at them, which immediately put Brie on guard. Twinkling old people invariably meant trouble. The last time an old person had twinkled at him, he'd ended up in the Infirmary for a week.

"Lemon drop?" A wrinkled old hand held a heinously bright dish out in offering, but all four students politely refused. The man appeared unconcerned and helped himself to a piece of candy, sucking on it as his eyes twinkled above half-moon glasses.

"Sir?" Mozarov proved to be the weak link in resisting the Headmaster's good cheer.

"Yes Mr. Mozarov?" The Headmaster knew he'd won a victory, and he knew that they knew, and his indulgent smile reflected that.

"Er, what is this all about?" Mozarov shifted uneasily in his overstuffed purple chair, understandably uncomfortable under the present scrutiny he was receiving.

"Whatever do you mean, dear boy?" Brie had a very strong urge to hex the indulgent smile off the old man's face. Honestly, 'dear boy'? If Dumbledore even thought about calling Brie 'dear boy'...

"This," Mozarov frowned vaguely. "Why are we all here?"

"Why, because I wanted to meet you all!" The Headmaster beamed as though a favorite grandson had just said something particularly clever. Brie reflexively curled his lip before smoothing his features back into something resembling neutrality. This man was not his enemy and he wanted it to stay that way.

"You've already met us," Rousseau pointed out pragmatically, and Brie could tell she was as annoyed as he was. She was very good at hiding what she thought, but not quite good enough to hide it from Brie – which meant the Headmaster could probably read her too.

His increased twinkling confirmed Brie's suspicion, and he carefully strengthened his Occlumency barriers until no emotion or expression leaked out. Cold, his mental voice whispered. Like Ice. Like Ami, you are ice. Nothing can touch you, nothing can reach you, because you are ice.

"Of course, my dear. But I'd like very much to get to know you." Silence greeted his pronouncement as the four students regarded him suspiciously. As much as Brie didn't want the Headmaster as an enemy, he was even more sure that he didn't want the Headmaster as a 'friend.'

Albus was finding it increasingly difficult to smile and twinkle. The children were so frustrating! He briefly entertained the idea of sending them away and trying again one by one so that he could just use Leglimency on them. That would make life much easier.

"And you, Miss Rzaeva? Have you settled in nicely with the other Ravenclaws?"

"Yes sir," the girl replied passively, her tea untouched in her lap. What good was slipping them a calming potion if they wouldn't drink it? Even Mozarov hadn't been drinking the tea, and he was a Hufflepuff!

Deciding to switch tactics – he'd tried asking about the school, how they were settling in, even the bloody weather – he turned to twinkle at his newest Gryffindor.

"Professor McGonagall has been complaining about your disregard for our uniform, Mr. mal Théa. I promised her that I would talk to you about it."

The boy simply stared back at him, completely neutral. Other than a brief period at the very beginning of the session, the boy had been completely blank. It was an odd sort of blankness; the kind Albus normally associated with consciously maintaining high security Occlumency barriers – but that was ridiculous. No 16 year old boy could possibly hold that sort of barrier so completely for so long.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself?" he prompted with an encouraging smile.

"Your uniforms are ridiculous and improper," the boy responded, voice distant.

"On the contrary, dear boy! They have a very long, very proper tradition as the Hogwarts uniform."

"I recommend that you refrain from calling me that." The boy met his eyes directly, forcing the Headmaster into a battle of wills. Cold green battled twinkling blue for dominance, neither willing to give an inch.

"I agree with Gabriel," Rzaeva broke into their staring contest, calmly bringing her cup to her lips. Albus could tell that she didn't actually take a sip, but at least she had picked up the cup. That was something.

"Oh?" he invited, dismissing the mal Théa boy for the moment.

"The uniform is improper. The skirts, as example, are much too short – it is very indecent."

For the first time, Albus noticed that she wasn't wearing the proper Hogwarts uniform either. Somewhere along the lines, she had switched the proper skirt for something heavy that reached her ankles. She still presumably wore the correct shirt and vest, though she wore her robes fastened over it. At least she wasn't flaunting the dress code like her French counterpart.

He twinkled – just for the principle of the thing – and smiled indulgently at her.

"Well, I can understand your cultural objection, Miss Rzaeva, and you may continue to wear long skirts. However, Mr mal Théa, you really must –"

"Please," the boy interrupted. "I am wearing your uncomfortable robes. I am willing to wear your uniform pants, but I find the shirts, vests, and ties to be distasteful and ugly. I am willing to compromise this far. If you object, then I will happily return to wearing my proper uniform."

Albus knew quite well which uniform mal Théa considered his proper one. It was bad enough that the boy was flaunting the rules this badly, but if he completely discarded the Hogwarts robes there was no telling how the other students would react. He'd probably have to leave the exchange program, which would set a bad precedent and possibly ruin the entire effort. To tell the truth, the Headmaster was extremely surprised that the teachers hadn't been taking points and

giving detentions – especially Severus, who was usually overenthusiastic in finding fault with Gryffindors.

After a moment, Albus decided to simply chuckle indulgently and let the boy have his way. The issue wasn't important enough to fight over, and he had bigger fish to fry. Such as informing the transfer students that they were expected to stay over Christmas break for the assorted festivities.

If Brie hadn't been so focused on retaining his Occlumency walls, he would've done a mental victory dance. As it was, he hardly acknowledged his win. He would celebrate later when he didn't have to worry about maintaining a strong defense.

So far tea with the Headmaster had been excruciating. Even Mozarov was obviously uncomfortable with the situation and was intelligently not drinking the drugged tea. (The Headmaster had obviously forgotten just who Brie was – calming potions like the one he'd used were common interrogation aids, and Brie was trained to recognize them by smell.)

It was only a matter of time before the Headmaster grew frustrated enough to dismiss them. Brie only hoped it would be sooner than later, and that it would happen before the old man lived up to his damnable twinkle.

"...Winter break," he was saying. "It is traditional for our International Students to remain in the castle to participate in the festivities. You are our guests of honor!"

Inside, Brie felt as if he'd been struck across the face. Stay? Over the winter holiday? He had to be kidding! There was no way that Brie was going to stay! Yule was one of the two annual family get togethers – everyone came. It was inconceivable that he wouldn't be there. And New Years! That was Brie's day. The celebration of his life. He couldn't miss it!

"Non," his voice resonated like a gunshot, breaking through his control. "C'est impossible."

The old man twinkled back at him, looking politely confused. "Excuse me? I'm very sorry, I don't speak French, young man."

Brie's eye ticked slightly and he forced himself to calm down through will power alone. Take a deep breath. In, and out. The old man couldn't really keep him here over the holidays. Mama and Uncle Shay would never permit it.

"He said no," Melisande translated unhelpfully.

"Merci, Rousseau," he shot her a quick glare, words laced with sarcasm.

"Well, my – Mr. mal Théa. I'm afraid that it was part of the transfer agreement. We even throw a Yule Ball in your honor!" Dumbledore's twinkling increased, and Brie couldn't stand it. His control shattered into a million pieces.

"Duin do ghob! Vas te faire foutre, vieux tabarnak! Flocci non facio! Kooshite govno ee oomeeite! Yabn el wiskha. Backarchodu! Zure ama emagaldua da."

He continued through several more languages, trying to find the words to properly convey his intense irritation. It was times like these that he really appreciated coming from a diverse background. By the time he wound down, everyone was staring at him. The Headmaster looked slightly disgruntled, but the other three students had expressions of impressed respect.

"If that is quite all," the Headmaster frowned disapprovingly. He had probably understood very little of the actual words, but there was no doubting Brie's tone.

Brie leveled one last powerful glare at the old man, then turned and walked out of the office, head held high. The other students rose and followed him. They all waited until they were away from the office before anyone spoke.

"You know, that might not have been the smartest thing to do, Gabriel," Anya chided gently, though her eyes laughed.

"Non, not particularly smart," Melisande agreed, giggling. "Mais c'est très magnifique! I did not know you were so well versed in cuss words, soldat."

"I did not even recognize all the languages that you used," Mozarov was staring at him, a slightly awed expression on his face.

"I caught the French, Latin, and Russian – very creative, by the way," Anya smirked slightly.

"There was obviously Hindi in there somewhere," Melisande added thoughtfully.

They fell to a discussion of the linguistic variety in Brie's obscenities. Brie remained silent unless directly questioned, preferring to work toward regaining his calm. After the boggart this morning, it was hardly surprising that he had lost his center – he only wished he'd done so less dramatically. That reaction was out of proportion to the situation and he was afraid he would pay for the mistake later.

"So do you actually speak all those languages, Brie?"

Brie turned to look at Anya, slightly surprised by the question. They were sitting at their study table with Levi and the other two had been helping Brie with his Ancient Runes homework. The question was completely out of the blue.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we couldn't even identify all the languages you used. How many do you actually speak?" Anya leaned her chin on her hands, dark eyes focused on Brie. Levi looked up as well, interested in the direction of the conversation.

"I am fluent in English and French," he began by stating the obvious, "as well as Hindi. I know enough Latin to get by, though I'm hardly fluent there. I can ask where the bathroom is in Russian and swear fluently in half a dozen other languages, but that's it."

"Impressive," Anya grinned. "How about you, Levi?" she turned to cock an eyebrow at the young scholar.

"French, Hindi, and English, like most of my cousins," Levi nodded slightly towards Brie. "I'm fluent in Latin, and you've heard my Russian. Val is determined to get one of us to learn it, for his sake. Another friend is teaching me Arabic, but I'm not very good yet."

"Who is teaching you Arabic?" Anya asked, impressed. None of the others had surprised her, but that one seemed a little random.

"Brie's friend Skylar is a linguist and the reason Brie is so well rounded when it comes to swearing. He decided that it would be fun to teach me."

"Is Sky a cousin?" she asked curiously. So far, everyone either boy had ever talked about had been related in some way to one or both of them.

"No," Brie quirked a slight smile. "Sky is no cousin. I decided not to kill him when we were young, and we've been friends ever since. He is very ...different. You would like him."

"What about you, Anya?" Levi turned the conversation back to their previous topic. "How many languages does a scholar such as yourself speak?"

"Russian is my mother tongue," she smiled. "I also speak English, of course, and Church Slavonic. I would like to learn French, though. I know a little, and by the end of the year I hope that spending time with you two will have taught me more."

The three continued to discuss languages, and Brie was glad to distract himself with something as calming and normal as having a conversation with his friends. He needed to find his center soon. The weekend couldn't come quickly enough.

A/N: On the language issue: there have been psychology studies in regards to being multi-lingual. First of all, children learn languages very easily up to around seven years old. In a multi-lingual family such as the mal Théas, it makes sense that the children would be able to speak several languages. There have also been studies that show that if you know more than one language, it is easier to pick up new languages.

Harry isn't all that studious. He's talented, yes, and he's very good at the things he's passionate about. He doesn't care for class work, though, which is why he tends to get As instead of EEs and Os. Languages are one of those things he never really bothered to study, so while he picked up bits of several languages, he doesn't care

enough to become truly fluent in more than the ones commonly used in his home.

Last thing – yes, I did say that Harry is married. Marriage and the "stages" of Traditionalist Pureblood marriages will be explained later. For now, you get to stew about it.

In order, Brie swore in Gaelic, French, Latin, Russian, Arabic, Hindi, and Basque.

Chapter Fourteen: Retreat

Flashback: The Ritual

The room was dark and quiet. It felt old. Very old. Yet it felt strong. I am ancient beyond memory, whispered the cold stones. I have seen countless generations pass out of mind, and I will see countless more generations live and die. The weight of years was strong as the small procession entered the circular chamber.

It was the ritual chamber of the mal Théas, and it was ready for use once again.

Around the room, candles flared into life, casting flickering shadows into the center of the circle. Eight white robed figures bowed to each compass direction, then knelt facing the inwards. Their backs were straight, faces solemn. This ritual was important, after all. It was extremely fitting that it should take place on New Year's Eve.

A Ninth figure walked in alone. He was tiny, but he walked with his chin up and his steps were firm. Blood red robes trailed behind him as he stepped through the circle of kneeling white robes. He stood in the precise center of the room and faced North.

"Who comes before us?" the words were whispered around the circle, seeming to come from all of the figures at once.

"Harry James Potter."

"What business brings you before us?"

"I Petition to be Reborn."

"Why should we grant your Petition?"

"Because I have died inside," the red robed child whispered.

There was a brief pause, and it seemed that the very stones of the chamber were deliberating. Seven minutes passed, and the figure in the north spoke the beginning of the ritual.

"I am Sarai Aliéné, and I Witness and Welcome this child as my child. This is my son. The Earth recognizes him." The white robe

bowed to the little boy, and the boy bowed back. They held their position for three breaths, and then the boy turned.

"I am Miriam Reine-Sharmila, and I Witness and Welcome this child. This is my sister's son. My soul recognizes him." They bowed for three breaths, and the boy turned.

"I am Naomi Cerise, and I Witness and Welcome this child as my brother. This is my mother's son. The Air recognizes him." They bowed for three breaths, and the boy turned.

"I am Didier Antonin-Arindom, and I Witness and Welcome this child. This is my aunt's son. My eyes recognize him." They bowed for three breaths, and the boy turned.

"I am Akshay Daman-Samar, and I Witness and Welcome this child as my nephew. This is my sister's son. The Fire recognizes him." They bowed for three breaths, and the boy turned.

"I am Maurice Aubin-Carel, and I Witness and Welcome this child. This is my niece's son. My blood recognizes him." They bowed for three breaths, and the boy turned.

"I am Guillaume Alucio-Emery, and I Witness and Welcome this child as my grandson. This is my daughter's son. The Water recognizes him." They bowed for three breaths, and the boy turned.

"I am Katyayani Sraddha, and I Witness and Welcome this child. This is my daughter's son. My heart recognizes him." They bowed for three breaths, and the boy turned.

Facing north once more, the boy knelt. He bowed until his forehead touched the cold stone floor at the center of the ritual chamber. He was silent for nine breaths before speaking.

"I have Petitioned and been Recognized. I am your son. I lay myself before you."

The words completed the opening, and the screams heralded the Change.

This was very old and rather obscure blood magic. It was a more complete form of the adoption ritual that they had already gone

through with the Ministry of American Magic. The Ministry's ritual was really a bit of legal fiction. It didn't even truly change Harry's name to Gabriel.

This was deeper.

This ritual, like the chamber, was old beyond memory. Once upon a time it had been used to adopt Muggleborn children into magical families. Once upon a time, such a child would have been left on a hillside to die. Wizards kept a watch for such children and would take them in. Once upon a time, wizards would even take preventative steps and simply steal a magical child from its cradle to be raised as a wizard. They would leave behind golems that would quickly sicken and die – the source of changeling legends.

Now, the ritual was banned. It was labeled Dark because of the use of blood, because it physically changed a person, and because of its traditional use. Labeled Dark and outlawed.

Legality had never stopped the mal Théas before.

The technicalities of the ritual had been something Rai had studied for weeks before even approaching her brother. It had very specific effects and very specific dangers.

It was designed to be used on young children, and conversely to most rituals, it got more dangerous the older the child got. It would kill an adult, or even a teenager. Only a child under a year had a one hundred percent chance of surviving the ritual.

It did not change a child's genetic makeup, per se. Brie, for example, would still register as having Harry Potter's DNA if a Muggle ever tested. Instead, the ritual forced the child into becoming a one-shot metamorphmagus. The blood of the adoptive parents directed the change, giving the child the family traits.

It was an unnatural change, however. In an infant who had yet to truly grow into their future faces, the change was merely uncomfortable. At three, it became dangerous for the child and for the observers, as the child released their magic in response to the pain. By ten, the forced change would be excruciating, and potentially lethal for everyone involved.

Rai's research had been very thorough. She understood the risks, and some of them would be long reaching.

In her son's case, the long term effects would probably be bad. He was very small for his age and the legacy of malnourishment and abuse was written deeply into his bones. Forcing his body to change and adapt would be even worse than for a normal child. Consequences could be anything from brittle bones to blindness, from paralysis to death.

Rai understood, and she made sure her son also knew. In the end, when they discovered the cost of the ritual, they knew they had gotten off easily.

"Gabriel Reuben-Amrit, you are a mal Théa. You are my son in the eyes of Brahman. Welcome, beloved child."

Flashback: December 31st, 1990

Night was quickly approaching and the falling snow leant a muffled, insulated feeling to the comfortable home. Golden light spilled from huge bay windows and glistened welcomingly on the already high snow drifts. Sounds of laughter could be heard from inside, and faint strains of music drifted out despite the heavy blanket of snow. It was December 31st and they were celebrating.

Fayette mal Théa clung to her father, sneezing rapidly as they appeared in front of Auntie Rai's home. She was five years old and hated Magical travel with a passion. Tonight it was for Brie, though, so she didn't mind so much. She loved Brie with all of her heart and was convinced that they should get married when they grew up. Fae thought that the day Brie came into her life was the best thing to happen to her, ever. That was why she loved December 31st so much.

Leverett Defayne, fondly known as Little Levi by his close relatives, solemnly stepped out of the huge fireplace into Auntie Rai's home. Seven years old and already frighteningly intelligent, the little scholar quickly picked out the adults he intended to pump for information tonight. Of course, he would have to get this done before his cousins noticed his arrival. Ever since his Lord Father had died, Levi had

been groomed to be Claudius Lord Defayne's heir. Ever since he could remember, there had been little time to play with others his age. His cousins made sure that he learned how to have fun. That was why he loved December 31st so much.

Vallis mal Théa let out a soft grunt of surprise as the Portkey left him sitting dazedly in Auntie Rai's Arrival Room. He scowled at his sister's offer of a helping hand – he was eight years old, and he could get up all by himself, thank you. In three weeks he would be nine, and Grandpa Mauri had promised that when he was big enough, he could get training just like Brie. Of course, he would be getting Auror training, but that would make playing Dark Lords and Aurors so much more fun! Val loved playing with all of his cousins, especially Brie. That was why he loved December 31st so much.

Gabriel mal Théa looked at himself in the mirror, a mixture of delight and disgust playing over his features. At ten years of age he was unable to wear short sleeves or open collars, or even go into public without a glamour over his scarred face. Today, however, he wore no glamour, and the burn and the jagged scar stood out starkly against his golden brown skin. Today, despite the snow outside, he wore a sleeveless open robe that fell loosely to his ankles, exposing his bare chest and arms and their network of scars. Today they celebrated what he was and what Mama Rai allowed him to be. That was why he loved December 31st so much.

December 31st, the end of the year. The mal Théas didn't gather to celebrate the New Year's Eve, however. They gathered together to celebrate Rai's little boy, who had become a son of their family on this day four years ago. It wasn't a full family gathering – that happened on the Winter Solstice in Lord mal Théa's ancestral chateaux. This gathering was relatively small and intimate.

Rai kissed her brother in welcome, then knelt to kiss little Fae. Geni and Didier had both arrived earlier by Floo, and after a murmured exchange with his sister, Shay hurried over to them. Rai smiled at Fae, who beamed back happily. The poor child had been stuffed into yet another one of the frilly monstrosities that Geni thought were adorable. Her thick black curls were held back by an enormous bow and she was wearing little dress shoes to match. Rai had no idea how she managed, but somehow the kid pulled the look off. Practice, most likely.

"Hello darling, how are you tonight?"

"Very well, thank you Auntie Rai," lisped the little girl, trying her hardest to look grownup.

"Well, Levi is around here somewhere, and I think Val got cornered by Ami and Cossette. Brie hasn't come down yet," she straightened up, still smiling at her niece. Reaching down she tugged on one of the ringlets that framed the upturned face. "Boing," she grinned, eliciting the usual giggle from their little ritual. "Scram, kiddo."

"I love you Auntie Rai!" Fae ducked around the sari-clad woman and disappeared into the crowd. Rai smiled and shook her head, watching the child vanish. Oh to be young...

Fae squeezed between Grandma and Uncle Mauri, earning an indulgent chuckle from her elders. She didn't notice, focused as she was on the goal ahead. Like Rai had predicted, her companion in arms had been trapped by two very intense young women.

Val was looking distinctly uncomfortable, eyes flicking between Ami and his sister as though trying to decide which presented the most danger. They were talking girl talk and kept switching between French and Hindi, leaving him at a loss for what they were saying half the time. Every once in awhile, his sister would squeeze his shoulder or ruffle his hair as though he were some sort of pet. Where was Brie?

"Hello Naomi, Cossette. Val." Fae affected her most pompous I'm-a-grownup air, sticking her nose up and trying to act like a sixteen year old girl. Even Ami had to fight a smile at the little girl's idea of teenagers.

"Hello Fayette," Cossette greeted, bending to kiss the girl's cheeks. She too put on the play-pompous air, tilting her head up and pasting on a very bored expression.

"Fayette," Ami greeted in her normal flat tone, though she too bent for a kiss. "Good evening, cousin."

"Hi Fae," Val waved, looking like he wasn't sure whether her arrival heralded escape or even worse torture.

After a brief conversation with the older girls, the two children slipped away to hide behind the couch. They sat there giggling together until Val caught sight of Levi talking animatedly with Rai. It was fairly easy to kidnap him away from their aunt, who merely laughed at their antics. From there, they migrated to the refreshment table and began grazing on the delightful little snacks Rosie had made for the evening.

Brie came down at 6:00 as he did every year – the moment the ritual had begun. At midnight, when the ritual had ended, there would be a few toasts and a few other traditions that were normally reserved for birthdays. In a way, this was his birthday. Rai, Ami, and Shay still recognized July 31st as the day his age changed, but even for them New Years was the true birthday of Gabriel mal Théa.

Everyone applauded as the boy walked down the stairs, a hesitant smile on his face. When he reached the bottom he was immediately swept up into hugs and kisses from the relatives who were present. Often they would whisper little words of encouragement or love in his ears before they pulled away. By the end of it, Brie's face was glowing from a mixture of pleasure and embarrassment.

His three favorite cousins waylaid him after his mother gave him the last of the welcoming hugs, pulling him over to the closet they had chosen as a meeting room. It was always fun when the four of them were together all at once.

October 4th, 1996

For Gabriel mal Théa, the weekend could not come quickly enough. He had lost his center on Tuesday and it had been impossible to find it again during the rest of the week. He had managed to keep himself outwardly calm, but inside he was dangerously restless. His nightmares had gotten worse, to the point where he had finally given in and taken Dreamless Sleep.

Now it was Friday. Herbology had passed without incident, as it always did. Lunch was spent quietly with Anya and Levi, who had been giving him his much needed space. During Defense he amused himself by imaging exactly what his mother would do to the professor if he tried another stunt like that boggart.

It was Charms now, and he was getting tired of Hermione trying to show him how to cast the damn spell. He wasn't an idiot and he didn't need her help!

"For Kali's sake, let me be," he snapped, turning a ferocious glare on the girl. She pulled away looking surprised and hurt. He immediately regretted losing his temper, but he refused to back down. After glaring for another moment he turned back to the figurine they were supposed to be animating.

Scowling, he cast the charm to bring the little pewter lion to life. It shook its mane sleepily then opened its mouth in a silent roar. Brie poked it irritably with his wand. He just wanted to get out of class and out of the castle.

After an interminable hour they were released and he headed immediately for his dorm room. All he had to do was collect his already packed bag and then he could leave. A nice weekend in the forest was exactly what he needed. And who knew, perhaps he would Apparate home for a visit. He could use a hug right about now.

"Um, mal Théa?" Brie looked up from where he knelt by the foot of his bed. Ron was looking slightly nervous, and it showed in his address – like most of the Gryffindor Sixth Years he had gotten into the habit of calling Brie by his first name these days.

"Oui."

"The Headmaster wants to see you."

If Brie hadn't been under severe mental strain, he would have simply nodded and left to see the Headmaster. He was severely stressed at the moment, however, and reacted accordingly.

"Meddlesome old man," he snarled, slamming the lid of his trunk as he hoisted himself to his feet. "He can wait to see me all he likes. I do not wish to see him."

Without another word, Brie opened the dorm room window and jumped.

Ron blinked as his chess partner threw himself from the Tower. That was... abrupt.

Suddenly recalling that they were a good ten stories up, Ron rushed to the window. There weren't any French guts on the ground, so he assumed that Gabriel had used a broom or a levitation charm. That was good. He would've hated to witness the first Hogwarts suicide in over a decade.

He meandered back down to the common room, somewhat impressed by Gabriel standing up to the Headmaster. That didn't happen very often, yet the French boy seemed to flaunt the rules with an ease that was the envy of his Housemates.

"Any luck?" Ron's friends looked up from where they were studying in front of the fire place.

Ron shook his head at Seamus's question, dropping himself onto the couch with a sigh. "He's been so... high strung lately. It's weird! I mean, he's always a bastard, but usually he's a quiet bastard."

"Yeah," agreed Ginny. "I heard he cussed out Professor Black for asking about his boggart!"

"Well," said Hermione, not looking up from her essay, "if that was my boggart, I don't think I'd want to talk about it either."

"That little boy looked really familiar," Seamus added, frowning into the fire.

"Those poor kids," Dean shuddered artistically.

"Let's not talk about Gabriel's horrific and utterly depressing imagination, please," groaned Ron. "Isn't there anything cheerful to gossip about?"

"Well, the Yule Ball is very slowly approaching," Ginny shot her brother a sly grin. "Some of the Fourth Years are so excited that they're already asking each other out."

"Do you know who you're going with?" Neville inquired, trying not to blush.

"No," Ginny raised an eyebrow invitingly, but Neville just nodded and buried his nose back in his homework.

"I wonder who the Transfers will go with," said Seamus with a speculative grin. "I heard the Headmaster decided to make them go with Hogwarts students this year to 'perfectuate interschool relations' or something."

"Perpetuate, Seamus, not perfectuate. And I'd heard that too." Hermione still didn't look up from her essay.

"Hey Seamus, I dare you to ask Rousseau!" Dean smirked at his friend, who immediately blushed.

"No way! She's a Slytherin! I can't ask a Slytherin!"

"Yeah, but she's a hot Slytherin," Dean pointed out pragmatically. Seamus just shook his head and blushed deeper.

"Just ask that cute 'Puff," Ron mumbled from the couch. "What's her face. The Fifth Year who always smiles at you in the halls."

"Cindy? That's not a bad idea. Do you think she'd say yes?"

"You have three months to persuade her," Dean pointed out pragmatically.

"What about you, Dean?" Ginny asked, leaning forward to peer around Hermione.

"I've got my sights set," he replied. He cracked his knuckles and flashed her a charming smile.

"Yeah?" she blushed a little. "Who!"

"Nope! Not telling."

"Oh, you're no fun." Ginny pouted for a second, then switched gears. "Do you think Gabriel will ask me?"

"No," Neville responded at the same time that Hermione shrugged and said "Maybe."

"Why not, Nev?" Ginny asked with a coy smile. "I think we'd look great together."

"Yeah, why not, Nev?" parroted Ron, who wasn't sure he liked the dynamic he was suddenly seeing between his sister and Neville

"Well, uh," Neville blushed. "He's a mal Théa! He'll probably try and find a way to get out of going at all."

"Why?" Ginny looked faintly horrified. "Get out going to the Ball? Why would anyone want to do that?"

"Because," Neville replied as if it were the most natural thing in the world. At Ginny's glare and the other's curious prompts, he shrugged. "Besides, he's got a girl already."

"What, Rzaeva?" Dean asked.

"No. Back in France."

"Who'd you hear that from?" asked Hermione, finally interested enough to look up from her homework.

"Gran," he replied stoutly. "She and Ms Rai go way back. I heard her say something about Gabriel getting married a few years ago."

"Whoa, hold on – married? You said he 'had a girl'! Not that he had a wife!" Ginny wasn't the only one who looked more than a little shocked at this revelation.

Neville just shrugged. "Same difference."

"No," argued Ginny. "No, not the same at all!"

"He's a Traditionalist – having a girl and having a wife are practically synonymous! You should know that, Ginny, even if your family is a bunch of 'blood traitors'."

"Anyways," Hermione inserted herself before things could escalate into a fight. "Gabriel has a wife? That's very interesting. Do you know who she is?"

"No," Neville admitted.

"Well, as interesting as this all is to speculate on, couldn't we just ask him when he gets back?" The other five members of the group turned to stare at Ron in surprise. It was a novel concept, after all.

Brie spent all of Friday in the forest, exercising and meditating to clear his mind. He alternated the two, making sure to thoroughly work out mind, body, and magic. By nightfall he had found his center.

He spent the night in the trees, bribing a nearby snake to keep watch for him. He slept easily for the first time in a week, exhausted and relieved to be away from Society. The longer he stayed at Hogwarts, the more he questioned his decision to come in the first place. It seemed to him that his old arrangement with Beauxbatons was much better, though he admitted that he was learning more magic now that he was forced to attend regular classes.

But nooo, he had to let Uncle Shay manipulate him. Damn bastard. "Remember your biological parents," right. Shay just wanted him to scope out the area and try to sniff out the Dark Lord.

Well, he'd better not be forced to stay over Yule and New Years. That would be a very bad move all around. Maybe Ami would be willing to come "chat" with the Headmaster on his behalf. That would be nice. He had no doubt that The Bitch could get Dumbledore to come around very quickly.

The next morning Brie woke with the sun. He gave the snake its promised reward, then easily slipped down to the ground. He spent his morning exercise pondering whether or not he ought to drop by the chateaux for a bit.

There was an important girl in his life that he hadn't seen since the beginning of September. He owed his wife a visit.

A/N: So I finally let you in on the ritual. Hopefully that clears up any lingering questions. I also wanted to show why New Years is Brie's day.

On Neville's 'blood traitor' comment: don't read too much into it. He isn't a zealot or bigot, he's just a boy having an argument who is falling back on jingoistic jargon to try and support his point.

Chapter Fifteen: Meet the Mrs

Brie shook himself as the Portkey dropped him off in his uncle's receiving room. It was nice to be back in France, and it was even nicer not to have to go through the International Floo. After a quick Scourgify to make sure he wouldn't track dirt through the chateaux, he headed off to collect clean clothes. After a day of heavy exercise and a night in the trees, he was in fairly desperate need of a shower.

The room he shared with Levi was spotless. Traces of both boys could be seen around the room, though Brie's presence was far stronger as he spent more time in the mal Théa's ancestral home. He gave a habitual salute to the closet containing all of his military supplies, a mocking gesture he'd picked up to irritate his uncle. Dropping his pack onto the floor by his bed, he quickly shucked his dirty fatigues. Tossing them negligently into the hamper and wrapping a towel around his waist, he headed out toward the shower.

It was a pity that the rooms didn't come with personal bathrooms. He'd tried petitioning his uncle for a change in that particular design flaw, but Shay would have none of it. The rooms of permanent residents all had personal bathrooms, but his uncle maintained that the rest of the family wasn't around often enough to justify the waste of space.

Brie slipped into the shower with a grateful sigh. Hot showers were little slices of heaven on earth. Very little was better than a long, hot shower. He smiled happily as the water ran off him and steam filled the room. He quickly lost track of the time, caught up in the soothing sensations.

"Brie? Darling, what are you doing here?"

Brie spun around at the sound of his aunt's voice. She was standing just inside the door, hands on her hips. He gave her a guilty smile, waving sheepishly through the rolling steam.

"Hi Aunt Geni. I'm just taking a shower – don't mind me."

"Yes, I can see you're taking a shower," the blonde raised an elegant eyebrow. "The question is why you are taking a shower here. Camille was most alarmed to find this bathroom in use."

"Sorry, Aunt. I'll be out in a minute, and I'll talk to you then. When I am not so... under dressed." He smiled at her again through the transparent shower curtain. She nodded imperiously.

"Very well. I expect you in my parlor in ten minutes."

"Yes, Aunt."

It took Brie less than five minutes to complete his shower and head back to his room to dress. He briefly considered donning one of his uniforms, but decided that it was inappropriate for his planned excursion. No matter how many ladies claimed to love a man in uniform, his wife tended to get frustrated by his limited wardrobe.

This, he supposed, was understandable, as she wanted to be a fashion designer when she grew up. He had no doubt that when they completed the marriage ritual and began living together, she would start coordinating their outfits. Not that he minded. As long as there were very few man-dresses involved, he couldn't care less what he wore.

After a moment's hesitation, he selected black slacks and a fitted grey turtleneck. He strapped on his leg braces after another brief internal war. He'd found it was better to wear them after a strenuous workout to avoid pain. As much as he hated them, they really were necessary. Grabbing his cane, he proceeded barefoot to his aunt's parlor.

The brief talk with Aunt Geni quickly turned into a leisurely brunch. Not that Brie was terribly surprised. The woman was a born socialite, and was anxious to hear about England and Hogwarts. It was pleasant enough, though Brie wasn't sorry when it ended. After all, he'd only intended the chateaux to be a way station, and hadn't been planning to see his relatives at all.

Brie leaned down to kiss his aunt's cheeks, then made his way out to the Apparation point. It was time to visit his wife.

Beauxbatons was as opulent and irritating as Brie remembered. He'd managed to get the timing down so that he showed up during the lunch hour, so he wasn't surprised to encounter very few blue-robed students walking the halls. A few older students called

greetings to him, which he returned with short nods, but no one stopped him as he made his way to the dining room. He found it assuring that he still had unimpeded access to this place.

He stepped into the dining room with a slight flourish, looking arrogant and aggressive as he swept the room with his gaze. At the head of the room, Madame Maxime looked up in surprise. She, at least, knew that he wasn't supposed to be here. He placed one hand on his chest and gave the intimidating woman a half bow. There was no use insulting the lady, after all. She nodded back, which he took as permission to approach. He made his way calmly through the hall, eyes sweeping the room for signs of his cousins or his wife.

"Madame Maxime," he gave another half bow when he reached her table. "I apologize for coming unannounced."

"Msr. mal Théa. I hope all is well at Hogwarts," her voice was slightly concerned, and it occurred to Brie that she would probably think this visit had something to do with his status as a transfer student. Well, it wouldn't be too difficult to dispel that particular misconception.

"Quite well, Headmistress. I am here for pleasure rather than business. If it is permissible, I would like to spend some time with my wife."

Maxime smiled. She had always liked him, despite his chronic truancy. Or perhaps because of that. After all, Brie was always at his most charming around the Headmistress, and he wasn't around often enough for her to see his less complimentary sides.

"I'm sure she will be delighted to see you, Gabriel. You have my permission to remain at Beauxbatons for the afternoon. Please come by my office after dinner so we can have a little chat before you return to Hogwarts."

"It would be an honor, Headmistress. Thank you very much." With a last half bow, he turned and made his way over to his cousins' table. The table was a comfortable fit for the eleven students sitting there. Darcy stood to greet him and the others followed his lead, though some of the younger students looked confused.

"Cousin," Darcy greeted with an easy grin. Brie gave a tiny smile in return, leaning over to kiss the older boy's cheeks. The two had

never been close – Darcy Evrard was even more distantly related than Val, and the Evrards had not been let in on the secret of Brie's identity.

"Cousin," Brie agreed as he pulled away.

As next oldest, Ansel stepped up for his greeting. He grinned as Brie ruffled his hair, eyes shining with admiration. Like Darcy, Ansel Jourdain was too far removed to know Brie's birth name. Unlike Darcy, however, that hadn't stopped the twelve year old from hero worshipping his distant cousin.

"Brie! You came! Why did you come? I'm glad you came!" the blue eyed boy was bouncing on the balls of his feet – he'd always been a hyper little bugger. Brie just shrugged as Rance took the opportunity to insert himself into the miniature ceremony.

"Coz!" Levi's handsome younger brother grinned mischievously as he stood on tiptoe to press cheeks. "Tonight, Laurence, 4th Corridor. Wanna help?" he whispered. Brie shook his head minutely, and Rance pulled away with a little pout.

Brie turned to greet the rest of the table, eager to get the polite pleasantries out of the way. "A pleasure as always Eliza, Desiree, Javier, Alayna." The four older students that he was already acquainted with nodded toward him from across the table, and he turned a slightly curious gaze on the four younger children he didn't know.

Darcy opened his mouth to continue the introductions but Ansel beat him to it, grinning with excitement as he introduced his hero to his friends.

"This is my best friend Sergey Provost, and that's Bernadette Rochefort, Pierre-Alexandre Constantine, and Gabrielle Delacour. My cousin, Gabriel mal Théa," he finished proudly. Brie's eyes met those of the pretty blonde child who shared his name, and she smiled shyly. He turned his attention back to Darcy.

"Where is Fae?"

"I'm not sure," the Seventh Year shrugged as he sat back down. "She comes and goes."

Brie frowned slightly, but the blonde girl spoke up. "She's probably in the library, sir."

"Thank you," he nodded slightly, amused to be addressed with the honorific. With another half bow to the table, he turned and began walking toward the door. There was a rustle behind him, and then the blonde girl appeared at his elbow.

"I'm going that way, too," she informed him by way of explanation. Internally he shrugged, not particularly caring if she came or not. "Um, Msr. mal Théa?"

"Yes?" he prompted, once again amused by the way she addressed him.

"Rance said you're related to Hr. Sinclaire."

"Yes. She's my sister. Why?"

"Oh. Well, I've always wanted to be a Healer, and..."

"And Naomi is the very last person you want to talk to about your aspirations, Miss Delacour. Trust me."

"Oh." The blonde looked crestfallen, and Brie heaved an internal sigh. Why did every Healer-wannabe want to meet his sister? She wasn't all that great. Sure, she was a prominent contemporary Healer, but her bedside manner sucked.

They walked in silence the rest of the way. The blonde obviously wanted to say something more, but she couldn't quite summon the courage to do so. Brie ignored it. He would've answered any questions had she asked, but he didn't care enough to initiate the conversation. She had chosen to accompany him, after all.

The library was just as he remembered it – spacious, light, and eerily silent. A few study tables were gathered near the center, each one supplied with silencing charms so students wouldn't disturb each other. Several tables were occupied, but one in particular caught his eye.

Fae sat alone, several books spread open around her. She had a small tablet in front of her and she was sketching with a look of deep concentration on her golden brown face. Brie took a moment to observe without disturbing her.

She really was a beautiful child. As dark as her father and as delicate as her mother, she would be a sight to see when she reached adulthood. Her thick black curls were pulled into a tight braid down her back and tied with a large white bow. The blue Beauxbatons uniform was tailored to fit her, and she wore it as though it was the most unique garment on earth. Gold hoops dangled from her ears, and several bangle bracelets had been carefully set to the side of her workstation so they wouldn't get in her way.

In Brie's eyes, this girl was perfect.

Oh she had her flaws, her physical imperfections. To Brie, this only served to make her interesting. Beauty wasn't exactly a rare thing in his family – anyone could be beautiful. It took a special girl to be interesting.

And no one could deny that Fayette mal Théa was an extremely interesting girl. From her bright honey colored eyes and engaging conversations, to her sparkling wit and contagious laughter, Fae was interesting.

Suddenly she looked up, staring at them in surprise. Brie became aware of the slightly goofy expression on his face and carefully smoothed away his emotions as Fae's face lit up. She mouthed his name, then launched herself at him. He couldn't help grinning as the eleven year old catapulted into his arms and hugged him.

"I missed you," she murmured into his shoulder as he rubbed her back soothingly.

"I missed you as well," he whispered into her hair, inhaling her soft vanilla scent.

"Right," beside them Gabrielle blushed and shifted. "I'll be studying. See you at dinner, Fae." Without a backward glance, she darted into a nearby row of books and was promptly forgotten by the couple.

"Walk with me?" Brie inquired, finally pulling away slightly, though he kept his arms loosely around her.

"The gardens are pretty," Fae suggested, switching to Hindi. Brie nodded in agreement, and the two slowly walked toward the grounds, arms wrapped around each other.

This was where he belonged. This was where she belonged – safe in his arms. More than anything else, this was the greatest gift the mal Théas had given him, and he would kill anyone who dared try and take it away.

It was noon on Sunday, and Brie had returned to Hogwarts in a better mood than he'd been in since he'd first arrived. He was once again dressed in dirty fatigues, having spent Saturday night and Sunday morning back in the Forest, training. His pack was slung over his shoulder and he was aware he smelled very bad. Before he could reach the Gryffindor Tower and the showers, however, his Head of House caught him and brought him into her office for interrogation.

"Where have you been?" Professor McGonagall glared at the unrepentant Brie.

"Out," Brie replied calmly.

"Mr. mal Théa, I am not sure you understand – this is a closed campus. Nobody, nobody leaves the grounds without the express permission of the Headmaster! Deten—"

"What causes you to believe I left the grounds?" Brie interrupted, raising his eyebrows. After all, most weekends he didn't. There was no reason to tell McGonagall that this weekend had been any different.

"Mr. mal Théa, I am not stupid, and—"

"No one said you were stupid, Professor. Far from it. I have the greatest respect for—"

"I wasn't finished."

"Professor."

"You have a strange way of showing respect, young man. As your Head of House, I am responsible for you. If anything were to happen..." she trailed off, mouth tightly drawn.

"I understand your situation, Professor, and I apologize for acting brash. However, please make an effort to understand mine. I am by nature and by training a highly active person. I am ill suited for sitting around in a school."

"I'm not saying that you can't go outside," McGonagall frowned. "The problem isn't that you leave the castle, it's that you leave Hogwarts for days, and no one knows where you've gone."

"The Forest," Brie replied promptly. "I go train in the forest. I believe I am correct that this is still on Hogwarts Grounds?"

The Deputy Headmistress blinked in surprise. "Well, yes, I suppose it is."

"Then it is settled." Brie nodded decisively. "If you will excuse me, Professor, I need a shower."

McGonagall heaved a sigh of resignation. "Take your shower quickly. The Headmaster wants to see you as soon as you're done. This issue is not resolved."

Brie gave her a slight nod before turning and leaving the small office. He hated quick showers. They were wasteful and unpleasant. The Headmaster had proved himself quite capable of waiting for a weekend and it would do him no harm to wait for another half hour while Brie showered and dressed.

A/N: Sorry it's short, but I figured better this than nothing, right?

Gabrielle Delacour is Fae's friend. She's a First Year at the moment, which is a slight stretch of canon on my part, but not too bad. (In GoF, Harry estimates that she can't be much older than 8, which would make her around 10 right now. I'm going to say that Harry is a terrible judge of children's ages, and push hers up to currently 11.)

As many of you guessed, Brie is indeed married to Fae. Please note that, as I tried to illustrate through the ritual, they are not blood

relatives. This is not incest and there is no sexual aspect to the relationship between Fae and Brie at this moment. (Which is part of the concept of different stages of marriage – this will be explained later.) I just wanted to clear this point up before it could conceivably cause a problem.

Betrothal/engagement - can happen at any point, from conception on up. This is a simple contract that can be broken without ramification.

1st Stage of Marriage - a finalization of the marriage contract, and the two people in question become monogamous and are considered legally husband and wife. This is when the large marriage ceremony takes place.

2nd Stage of Marriage - a renewal of vows and the union is consummated. Now the couple is considered to be married adults; the timing for this ritual varies from culture to culture, but will not happen until both are seen as full adults.

Chapter Sixteen: Conversations

"Very well, thank you Pomona. That brings us to our fourth student. Gabriel mal Théa. Who would like to begin?" Dumbledore smiled genially at his staff as they sat discussing the new students.

"That boy is out of line," complained McGonagall. "He deliberately flaunts the rules of this institution and he has no respect for authority."

"He respects me," Snape smirked slightly at the Gryffindor Head of House.

"I can't for the life of me get him to participate!" Flitwick moaned at the other end of the table. "I'm at a loss for how to get through to him!"

"Well, he's an absolute sweetheart in my class," Sprout inserted stoutly. "Never a bad thing to say to anyone, and absolutely wonderful with the plants! He even came down with darling Neville to help me repot Mandrakes last week."

Sirius snorted in disbelief. Mal Théa? A sweetheart? Definitely not an epithet that Sirius would've given the kid.

"Yes, Sirius? Do you have something to add?" Dumbledore smiled at him.

"I think the boy is royally messed up. Did you hear about his boggart?" there were a few nods, but most of the other professors shook their heads in confusion. "Kids. Children that had been tortured, raped, you name it. That boy needs help, or something."

"I don't see how that's any of our business," Snape drawled.

"On the contrary," the Headmaster frowned disapprovingly. "The safety and health of the students in this institute are most certainly our business."

Snape shook his head and leaned back. "Fine – write his mother with your concerns, then let the matter go. I guarantee that his mother is providing him with a safe home, and the mal Théas do not appreciate outsiders nosing around in their business."

"Oh? And you know this how?" Sirius sneered at his rival.

"Ms Rai and I are well acquainted," snapped the Slytherin. "Not that it's any of—"

"Gentlemen!" reprimanded the Headmaster. "Very well, Severus. I will write a letter to Sarai mal Théa as you suggest."

"He admitted that he spends his weekends in the Forbidden Forest," griped McGonagall.

"Really?" Sirius was immediately interested.

"Yes, he mentioned that to me," Dumbledore sighed. "I have given him leave to continue, pending the written permission of his guardian."

"And his disregard for the dress code?" McGonagall sounded resigned.

"I have also excused him from wearing the full uniform, for cultural reasons," nodded the Headmaster.

McGonagall sighed and rubbed her temples. "That boy gives me a headache," she confided. "I've seen him with his friends, and he seems like a nice enough boy, he's so... so..."

"Like James," Sirius murmured wistfully.

McGonagall looked up in surprise, then nodded, a little smile on her own face. "Yes. Exactly right. He's like James in many ways. But at the same time he's very much like you, Severus," she smirked slightly at the Potions Master, who scowled at being even loosely connected with James Potter.

"Welcome back!" Ron grinned as Gabriel stepped through the portrait hole. Hermione put her homework off to the side as he joined her on the couch.

"Did you talk to the Headmaster yet?" she inquired, a note of disapproval in her voice.

"Oui," he said as he relaxed back into the soft cushions.

"And?" prompted Ginny from the floor by the fire.

"And?" he repeated blandly.

"What did he have to say?" Hermione clarified in exasperation.

"He is writing to my mother regarding my weekend activities."

"That's all?" Ginny asked in surprise.

Gabriel didn't reply, but Hermione got the impression of a shrug. How interesting – either she was getting better at reading him or he was loosening up around them. Both possibilities pleased her.

"So what'd you do this weekend?" Ron asked cheerfully, setting aside his Charms essay with a little too much gusto for Hermione's taste.

"I trained."

"All weekend?" asked Ginny.

Gabriel made that weird humming noise, and Hermione gritted her teeth. No matter how many times he made that sound, it continued to put her on edge. Why couldn't he be more normal? Oh. Silly question.

"That's boring," Ron declared. "If you're going to go to all the trouble of sneaking out, why don't you spend your time off getting girls or something?"

Gabriel raised his head to look at Ron. "If you snuck out, is that what you would do?"

"Well, probably not," he admitted. "See, I've got a girl, and she's right here." He gave Hermione a hopeful grin, but she just rolled her eyes.

"I'm not your girl, Ron."

Ron just shrugged. "Yes, well, regardless – no, I wouldn't sneak out to get girls. I might visit a few bars, though!"

"I do not like alcohol," Gabriel responded tightly. Hermione watched in surprise as the boy seemed to tense up for a second before relaxing again.

"Oh," Ron replied, obviously not quite sure what to make of that response. "Well, ok. No girls, no bars... Maybe... Oh, I don't know. Huh. I would've thought it'd be way easier to think of things to do."

"Train," came the wry suggestion.

Ron laughed. "Maybe I would go out and find people who can match me in chess!"

"Boys," groaned Ginny. "Never thinking of the real pleasures in life. Like shopping! Oh, don't look at me like that, Hermione. Not clothes! You know what I mean."

"Well, not that I would ever sneak out..." said Hermione, trailing off as she considered what she would do if she ever broke the rules.

"Books," intoned the Weasley siblings together, laughing as Hermione huffed in response.

"Hey Gabriel?"

Brie glanced at his chess partner and made a quiet humming sound in invitation as he moved his knight.

There was a pause as Ron considered his next move, then urged forward his bishop. "Gabriel, Neville mentioned you...had a wife."

Brie looked up in surprise. "Yes," he murmured before moving his queen to claim the bishop.

"So you do?" Ron gaped slightly, as though he'd been expecting Brie to deny it.

"Yes." He raised an eyebrow at the redhead, who blushed and quickly made his next move.

"Um... You, uh, don't have to answer this if you don't want to, but I was curious... Who're you married to?"

"Her name is Fayette."

"Oh. What's she like?" the redhead gave Brie a guileless look. He seemed honestly curious. Brie thought for a moment as he nudged his rook.

"She is very kind," he began after a short silence. "Sweet, but fiercely protective of others. Brave, intelligent, creative –"

"Pretty?" Ron asked with a little smile.

"Yes. Beautiful." Brie moved his knight. "Check."

Ron quickly moved his king. "Is she our age?"

"No," Brie pressed his advantage.

"How old?" Ron inquired as he claimed the offending knight.

"Eleven."

"Oh, that's – eleven?" The redhead shook his head slightly and turned all his attention on Brie. "Did you just say your wife is eleven?"

"Yes," said Brie, watching the boy's reaction with a faint sense of bemusement. Ami's husband Audric had been surprised by their ages too, but he had an excuse. Ron was a pureblood – he had to have come in contact with Traditionalist marriage before now!

"Um. Wow. I'm missing something, aren't I."

"Yes. Ask Neville. Check."

"Checkmate," responded Ron, as Brie blinked in surprise. How had that happened? When had the redhead maneuvered there? How intriguing.

"Good game," Brie gave an acknowledging nod to the victor, then stood and walked out of the common room. He needed Anya's help with their Ancient Runes essay.

"Traditionalist marriage? What about it?" Neville looked up in surprise as Ron dropped down into the chair beside his sister.

"Well, how about starting with how old you have to be," Ron prompted.

Neville blinked. That wasn't necessarily all that helpful in clarifying the question. "Um... Do you want to know the stages of marriage? The process of arrangements? The ceremonies? What do you want to know?"

"Stages of marriage?" Hermione jumped into the conversation. "I've heard of arranged marriages before, but I've never heard of marriage as having stages."

"Yeah, there're three stages: the betrothal, the vows, and the marriage. Why don't you guys just look it up?"

Hermione, Ron, and Ginny exchanged a glance, and Hermione shrugged. "Alright," she nodded. "Fair enough."

A ten minute search and the help of Madam Pinch unearthed a copy of *Marriage Through the Ages*. They gathered around the table again while Hermione flipped through the book.

"Here we are! There are three stages of marriage – 1st, 2nd, and 3rd. Well, that's dumb. Of course three stages will be 1st, 2nd, and 3rd! Honestly, wizards," Hermione tutted under her breath.

"Just read," Ginny prompted.

"The 1st stage is the betrothal. Du, du, du... anytime after birth ... du, du, du... Oh, here! The betrothal is a simple contract between the parents of the parties to be joined or between the parties themselves. It can be broken without censure! That's interesting."

"Censure?" Ron asked, trying to find the word in the text.

"Oh, without any sort of ramification or social stigma."

"Right," Ron snorted. "That explains everything."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Just keep reading," she said.

"The 2nd stage is the taking of the vows. Mhmhm... a finalization of the marriage contract ... two people become monogamous ... now legally considered man and wife. Ok, so this is where the main ceremony would take place. Oh, that's interesting – apparently the only age qualification is that both parties must be able to say the vows themselves." Hermione frowned slightly, but continued. She could rant about the unfairness of it all once she was finished reading the entire section.

"3rd stage... renewal of vows... union is consummated – here we go – both parties must be of a legal age."

"So Gabriel's at the 2nd stage," Ron nodded to himself. That made more sense. At the others' prompts, he proceeded to give them what little he'd managed to glean from the Frenchman. After all, Gabriel had never said anything about it being a secret.

Written in Hindi:

Nephew,

I was pleased to hear that you have been keeping up your training. Colonel Rideaux reports that your men are doing well. I request and require your presence on Saturday the 19th at dawn. I expect you in uniform.

Your aunt and cousins are all doing well, though I understand you spoke to my wife and daughter yourself this past weekend. Some old friends dropped by the other day to let me know our old Social Club will be starting up again very soon. They're planning a few rallies this month. It might amuse you to know that they wished me to extend the invitation to you as well.

Madame Maxime wrote me about your feelings on the upcoming winter break. You will attend the Yule Ball, but you will not be expected to remain the rest of the holiday. I have written your Headmaster to inform him of my decision. Do not attempt to try to

talk to Rai to get out of this – your mother and I are agreed on this subject.

I hope you enjoy the rest of the term.

Akshay Lord mal Théa

p.s. Inform me when you are finished translating that book you've been working on. I am quite interested in seeing it.

A/N: Yes, Harry Potter was indeed just invited to join the Death Eaters. Go figure.

Chapter Seventeen: October

The week passed quickly, with Brie anxiously awaiting some response from his mother. If she didn't reply to the Headmaster about his weekend trips by Friday, he would be compelled to remain in the castle. He was not looking forward to the possibility.

Levi and Anya were both amused by his restlessness, though he was careful to appear as calm and collected as ever to the rest of the school. No need to raise their curiosity more than absolutely necessary, after all. One thing he'd found during his stay at Hogwarts was that his new Housemates were extremely nosy. It had been amusing in the beginning, but he was growing tired of the probing questions. Why couldn't they just leave well enough alone?

They were just leaving the Charms classroom when the Headmaster sent him a note. With a mumbled prayer to Shiva that his mother had sent her permission, he set out at a quick pace for the Headmaster's office. The gargoyle stepped aside at his approach, and he gave the thing an absent nod as he stepped onto the moving stairs.

The conversation with Dumbledore was short and disappointing. There had been no reply from Rai – which probably meant she hadn't received the letter yet – and the Headmaster simply wanted to remind Brie of the agreement not to venture into the Forest.

"Perhaps you would enjoy a trip to Hogsmead instead?" he invited, but Brie left without committing himself to the venture.

"What did the Headmaster want?" Hermione asked as Gabriel joined them in the common room.

"My mother has not replied," he said shortly, settling into an empty armchair as he rifled through his book bag.

"So you'll be around this weekend?" Ginny sounded surprised.

"Yes."

"Don't sound so excited about it," mumbled Neville from his spot on the couch. Gabriel ignored him in favor of opening his book and thumbing through it.

"Would you like to go down to Hogsmead with us?" Ginny invited, glancing around at her friends. "The Three Broomsticks has really good butterbeer..."

Gabriel made that stupid humming noise as he began reading.

"And," Ginny went on, "you need to get a costume!"

That caught Gabriel's attention. "A what?"

"A costume!" Ginny repeated. "You know, you dress up –"

"I know what it is," he interrupted, quirking an eyebrow. "Why do I need one?"

"Tradition," she grinned. "Every year the Gryffindors dress up for the Halloween Feast. Last year we even got some Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws to join in."

"Good for you."

"Everyone does it," she wheedled. Gabriel didn't reply.

"So why aren't you in the Library?" Hermione asked after the silence had stretched for several long minutes.

"I hate libraries," he replied, turning the page.

"You do?" she blinked, startled. "But you spend all your free time there!"

"It's the Ravenclaw effect."

She gave a surprised laugh at the turn of phrase. It was an interesting way of putting it.

"Still, why aren't you there now?" asked Neville.

"My Ravenclaws are in their common room, and I have no way of letting them know that I'm stuck here for the weekend."

Dragging the French student down to Hogsmead the next morning proved easier than they had anticipated. All it had taken was a brisk command from his little Ravenclaw shadow – Hermione had caught the words 'book' and 'necessary' in the fast paced French – and Gabriel was cloaked and ready to leave.

"Um, are your Ravenclaw friends coming with us?" Neville asked as they headed down toward the village.

"No," Gabriel replied, cane catching the morning sun.

"They're welcome to join us," Ginny added generously, looking back toward the castle.

"Thank you." He continued walking.

"Or not," Ginny mumbled, rolling her eyes as she shared a look with Hermione. Hermione grinned back.

"So what did your shadow want?" Hermione inquired lightly, hoping to spur some sort of conversation.

"A book."

"Did you know that conversations require more than two words together from both parties involved?"

"Indeed."

"Talking to you is like pulling teeth," Hermione griped. "You are allowed to expand on your answers, you know."

He made that stupid humming noise. She almost gave up right there, but Neville's muffled laughter spurred her on.

"So. Let's dissect a portion of this so-called conversation, shall we? I asked what your shadow wanted. Now this is A) an opportunity to tell me the name of your shadow and a little bit about him, and/or B) answer my question about what he wanted in a sentence or more. Perhaps you might even elaborate on why he didn't come himself."

"My cousin Levi," Gabriel said obligingly, "wants me to pick up a book for him, as Anya is ill and he promised to keep her company."

"See!" Hermione beamed, clapping sarcastically as their friends laughed. "That wasn't so hard! A full informative sentence – give the boy a medal."

Laughing, Ginny snagged a pebble from the side of the path. With a mumbled incantation, she transfigured it into a shiny pin and tossed it to the bushy haired witch. Gabriel bore their teasing, and even seemed amused by it. He'd never admit it, of course – but Hermione was definitely getting better at reading him.

He even let them pin the medal to his cloak.

"I think we should choose a theme," Ginny announced over butterbeer.

"Like what?" her brother asked.

"How about the Greek gods?" Hermione suggested.

"Animals?" asked Dean.

"Harry Potters," Seamus grinned.

"Muggles," suggested Neville.

"The Chudley Canons," declared Ron.

"Gypsies!" laughed Ginny.

Brie remained silent as the others laughed and argued. He had to admit – to himself, at least – that it would probably be a lot of fun to participate in the masquerade. Of course, he balked at the idea of wearing anything that didn't cover him as completely as his normal clothes, but there had to be some way around that. If it came down to it, he could always wear a temporary glamour over the scars on his body.

It was an interesting experience to spend time with people his own age who weren't related to him. Most of the people he spent any time with shared distinguishing features with him. Sky was the only notable exception until now. Anya and the Gryffindors, however,

were normal kids. The sort of friends he might've made had he remained Harry Potter.

It was an interesting experience indeed.

"Come on, Gabriel! It's not that bad. The rest of us are doing it," Ginny coaxed, holding up the billowy white robe.

"I am not a lemming," he muttered in response, frowning at the garment. "Jump off your own bridge."

"What?" The redhead stared at him in confusion.

"Did... Gabriel mal Théa, did you just allude to Muggle sayings?" Hermione gaped at him from where she was sorting through gold braiding. When Gabriel made no move to deny it, she began giggling helplessly.

"What?" Ginny pressed, anxious to be let in on the joke. "Come on, tell me!" Hermione shook her head, unable to respond through her laughter. Ginny huffed at her and returned to the thankless task of convincing the French student that dressing as a choir of angels would be fun.

Another week flew by. Quidditch became all anyone could talk about as October wore on. Brie expressed disinterest and the others left him alone about it. When Levi asked why he wasn't going out for the team, he'd shrugged. After flying with the cavalry, schoolyard Quidditch just couldn't cut it.

Saturday finally arrived, and Brie made sure to wake well before the sun. He briefly considered neglecting his morning exercises, but decided against it at the last minute. It was always better to be warmed up before a session with his uncle.

Brie carefully fastened both his braces, grabbed his cavalry broom, and swung his uniform cloak around his shoulders. It was time to meet his uncle.

(Full conversation in Hindi)

"The Dark Lord is moving."

"It was only a matter of time."

"Yes."

"Do you think we're ready?"

"Do you?"

"Yes. The men have trained hard for this. No one will see it coming."

"And you, nephew? Are you ready?"

"...I don't know."

"You are strong."

"I am broken."

"No. Never believe that. You are whole – I made you so."

"As you say."

"You don't believe me."

"..."

"Look at me. Gabriel, you are the son of my family, and I protect my own – but you do not need protection any longer, do you. You stand alone."

"Not alone, sir."

"Very well, not alone. But you stand tall and strong. I am proud of you, my son. You've grown since we first took you in."

"Of course I have, Uncle Shay. I was a child then."

"Do you know what I saw the first time I met you?"

"A scrawny little freak?"

"Don't take that tone of voice with me, boy."

"Sorry, sir."

"I'm not very good at this, you know. Emotional reassurance was never my strong suit."

"It's alright, Uncle. Just leave it. It makes us both uncomfortable."

"All the more reason to say it."

"Very well. What did you see?"

"I saw spirit. Passion. Fire. You might not remember, but you had the gall to stick up to me – to me."

"Really? How... refreshing. Is that why you were in such a hurry to teach me my place?"

"Imp. I ought to make you do laps for that."

"Yes, you probably ought to."

"Hmph."

"It is dawn, my Lord General."

"Ready the men. We move in ten."

"Yes sir."

"And Brie –"

"Yes sir?"

"You are strong. Now move."

(All conversations in French)

Their attack was unexpected. Most of the villagers were still asleep, and even the soldiers – the true targets of the attack – were caught off-guard. Holding the cavalry in reserve, Brie watched the battle from the air. In truth, it was more a slaughter than a fight. The soldiers were poorly trained and without strong leadership. How they expected to get anything done was more than Brie could fathom.

"Sir, there's a leak," Lieutenant Knill interrupted his musing. "Two on the west road."

"Stun and bind them. Bring me their wands."

"Yes sir," the lieutenant spun in the air to pass along the orders.

The Butcher's army swept through the small Wizarding village with precision. The villagers were rounded up and the soldiers who had been mustering there were killed. Any who attempted to resist were similarly dealt with. Brie smiled to himself. If you defied the Butcher, of course you must pay the price. Everyone knew that. If they were stupid enough to rebel anyways, well, they knew the consequences.

France was the Butcher's turf. His sphere of influence included most of Europe, but that influence was only exerted for a price. Shay sent Brie and his men to Germany, Spain, Russia, and other countries when that price was right. France, however, belonged to the Butcher.

It was unofficial. Goyet was still Minister of Magic, voted in by the people. Likewise, Chirac led the Muggles of France. Aurors and the Muggle law enforcement policed the public. Most of the time people regarded the Butcher as a boogeyman, a tale to frighten children into good behavior. He was careful to exert his influence delicately and with precision. But no matter how he went about it, France belonged to the Butcher, and all the officials knew it.

During the first war against Voldemort, the Butcher had allied himself with the British Dark Lord. His iron fist had kept France from offering any support to their allies across the channel. He had helped to spread the war to all of Europe, all the while biding his time. Once Voldemort was spent – or believed himself secure, whichever happened first – Akshay Lord mal Théa planned to move in. The hard work already done, he intended to seize power and all of Europe would belong to him as France did.

At least, that had been the plan.

It did not bear fruit, to the Butcher's dissatisfaction. He had withdrawn back to France, where he strengthened his hold. He may not have the world, but he'd be damned if he lost his country. Sometimes people got it into their heads to rebel. Wizards were

especially uneasy with his presence, and at least once every few years there would be an uprising. It was always put down quickly, efficiently, and without mercy.

Brie was pulled from his musings by the polite "sir?" from Colonel Rideaux. The roundup was complete. With a brusque nod, he dropped from the sky to join the ground troops surrounding the villagers. It was time to leave an impression.

"There are more troops on the east bank of the river, sir," Lieutenant Knill was once again at Brie's elbow. "At least one unit of cavalry and two of ground troops."

"Send the Hawk," Brie ordered as he inspected a map. "I want numbers and position."

"Right away, sir."

"Have you interrogated the prisoners?" asked Brie before the lieutenant could turn away.

"No sir. They're still under."

"Interrogate them now."

"But sir—"

"Now, Lieutenant."

"Yes sir." The man turned and left. Brie wouldn't tell him this yet, but he was pleased by the lieutenant's quick responses and readiness for orders.

"Captain Lorraine, how are your men?"

"Tired, sir. The wounded have been Portkeyed out as you ordered, and the rest are guarding the remaining villagers. They would not be at their best in a fight, sir."

"Very well. Colonel Rideaux."

"Sir?"

"I want a message sent to the General immediately. I want reinforcements, and I want them now."

"Yes sir."

The temporary Headquarters – an old shed near the middle of town – was bustling with activity. The two men too badly hurt for magical transportation were being cared for in one corner, and the single fatality was wrapped in a morgue bag awaiting an available Portkey. The two men who had tried to escape were heavily bound in the opposite corner and were just coming around under the ministrations of an interrogation specialist. Brie himself stood beside a transfigured table, glaring down at a map of the local territory as his men went about their duties.

"How the hell did Shay miss that?" he grumbled under his breath.

"Sir?" Colonel Rideaux had returned from relaying Brie's call for reinforcements and was standing calmly on the other side of the table.

"Nothing. I want the villagers taken somewhere less conspicuous. The rebels don't seem to have noticed us yet, and I want to keep it that way."

"Do you believe they're ignorant of our presence?"

"I don't see how they could've missed us, but they made no move to defend the village which is unusual."

"As you say, sir."

"Proceed with caution, Colonel. Assume they've seen us, but stay hidden as much as possible."

Dawn for the boys on the east bank of the river was bright and cheery. The village, nearly two miles down the road, was presumed safe and well guarded. As far as they were concerned, the Butcher had no idea they were gathering – all the men had gone through careful background checks and a veritaserum interrogation. No spies could have infiltrated and the camp itself was heavily spelled against being found.

When a lone hawk wheeled slowly overhead, a few men pointed and grinned. It was a good omen, they cried. After a few lazy passes, the hawk swooped down to scoop a fish from the river. It flew off and the men went back about their business.

It was three hours after dawn when the first sentries went missing. Fifteen minutes later, the soldiers who went to check on them went missing. One managed to send up a flare before being struck by the killing curse.

Men poured from the bushes on all sides, and for a moment everything was chaos. The rebels had been drilled, however, and they quickly formed into ranks and units. Curses flew from both sides as the Butcher's army forced them to the river.

At the river they met the Archangel's Cavalry. Those rebels who had brooms mounted them and took the fight to the air. Only one lived to tell of it.

(All conversations in English)

When Brie entered the Great Hall Monday morning, everyone fell silent. Even Anya and Levi stopped talking as he slowly made his way to his normal place at the Gryffindor Table. For a moment it seemed as though his Housemates didn't intend to give him room to sit, but at the last minute they scooted aside. He sat quietly, deliberately letting his cane scrape across the stone as he did so. He began to eat.

Slowly talk picked up again, though all around him students stared. For awhile he was content to eat in silence, but finally curiosity drove him to fix Neville with a burning stare. The boy fought to avoid eye contact, but finally surrendered.

"Um, good morning mal Théa."

"What happened to Gabriel?" Brie asked, hiding his surprise as best he could. He'd gotten used to his Housemates calling him by his first name and he had to admit that his feelings were a little hurt that they'd reverted to his last name.

"Oh, right. Sorry G-Gabriel." The plump boy shifted slightly in his seat, eyes pleading for help.

"Why the cold shoulder?"

"This," Hermione glowered, thrusting a rolled up newspaper at him. He took it from her and blinked at the front page.

Archangel Slaughters French Village!

On Saturday, October 19th, the quiet Wizarding village of Tienna was attacked by the Butcher's Army. Twenty eight young men who were boarding in the village were killed, as were three residents.

"They came out of nowhere!" Madeline Sancoulier sobbed as she explained events to reporters. "It was dawn and I was milking the cow. Two boys were living with me and helping me around the house. Men in gray and red came in and . . . killed them, right in front of me."

Other villagers tell of similar events. The young men valiantly attempted to protect their adopted home, but all fell to the overwhelming odds. The people of Tienna were gathered in the center of the village, where they were greeted by the Archangel himself.

"I'd never seen anything like him," confessed Hubert Lefoy, an elderly gentleman who has lived in Tienna all his life. "He was very tall, and powerful. I don't remember his face, except he was very dark, with the most extraordinary eyes. Green, I think. They glowed, like the killing curse he used on poor Franz."

"Ten feet tall," Sancoulier described. "Huge. With black hair and robes that looked like they'd been soaked in blood. I swear he glowed." Although the details of his description varied according to each person interviewed, one point remained consistent. "His eyes were green, like the Unforgiveable."

A young man survived the battle that took place immediately after the Archangel claimed the village. For safety reasons, he requested that he remain anonymous. His testimonial gives proof to the legends about the Dark Angel.

"I've played Quidditch for years. I'm good on a broom. It made sense that, when the Archangel attacked, I hopped on my broom to fight in the air. Nothing prepares you for an airborne battle. Not like that.

"The enemy was everywhere, curses were everywhere. It was like... well, it wasn't like anything you'd want to imagine. Like a thousand bludgers, coming in from all sides, and you can't hardly tell who's on what side through all the mess.

"I could see him, though. He was in red. Blood red. Like some bloodthirsty god from legend. Or an avenging angel. I can see why they call him that. I was hit by a binding curse, and I fell, but I could see him still. It was like some perverse dance. He looked at me once, before I was hit. His eyes glowed green, like he was so full of the killing curse, that it had to leak out. I'm glad I fell."

No one knows for sure where the Archangel got his name. The Parisian Butcher's right hand man, the Archangel is nearly as feared as his commander. Although neither man's identity is officially confirmed, both are believed to be relatives of Hélène, Dark Lady of France.

By the second paragraph, Brie was smirking. The comments about his eyes earned a snort. By the time he finished the article he was laughing. Not a wry chuckle, either. Full laughter that had him bent over clutching his sides. The Gryffindors could only stare at him in horror as he guffawed over the article.

"He laughed at it!" Seamus shook his head in disbelief.

"Okay, did anyone else find that extremely disturbing?" Ginny shuddered as she pulled her feet up onto the couch.

"You don't have to sit by him in class," grumbled Hermione. "Every time anyone looked at him with anything remotely resembling fear, he got this goofy smile on his face. Really goofy. Professor Flitwick's reaction even got him to start laughing again."

"That boy has serious issues," Dean muttered.

"What was so funny about that article, anyway? I mean, I thought his reaction was disconcerting, whether it was about him or not."

"It was definitely about him," said Neville, frowning down at his hands.

"I wonder what really ha—"

"No," Hermione interrupted her redheaded best friend. "No. I think this is one area that I am not at all curious about."

"I agree," Ron seconded. "Whatever Gabriel does for his uncle... If he does anything... Well, it's none of our business, right? The less we know, the better."

They were all quiet for a minute, thinking this through. Finally Seamus broke the silence.

"Glowing green eyes? It's a good thing he keeps his curtains closed at night!" The others gave a weak chuckle in response.

By Halloween, things were back to normal, though Brie had been slowly developing a killer headache. The Slytherins were perhaps a bit more interested in him, and the Gryffindors held back just a little more. Brie didn't really mind. He'd gotten a few laughs from the article in the Daily Prophet, and that was that. The buzz would die down eventually.

For awhile he thought the incident would keep his Housemates from pestering him about the masquerade. He underestimated them, however, as he began getting pointed comments before breakfast on the 31st. By the time they were ready to prepare for the Feast, he'd grudgingly agreed to go along with it.

Ten minutes before they were supposed to head down, he stood inspecting himself in the mirror.

The robes were white and spelled to give off a faint glow. A gold cord was tied around his hips, acting as belt of sorts. His feet were bare – he'd announced they would all go barefoot or he wouldn't participate – and he'd left his braces in his locked chest. Black hair was left loose tonight, and he'd artfully arranged it to tumble in attractive curls around his shoulders.

Wings and a halo had been a bit more difficult, but Hermione had finally found the right spells. A few pillows had been sacrificed for

the cause before Seamus had the bright idea to ask the House Elves for help. Brie now wore large wings on his back fashioned from white chicken feathers. He shifted his shoulders experimentally and grinned as the wings flexed – that had been his own addition to the spell.

The only real complaint Brie had about the outfit – other than the fact that it was a man-dress – was that it exposed too much of his shoulders and neck for his comfort. The neckline was loose enough that it tended to slip off his shoulder if he wasn't careful. He'd put several powerful glamours over his entire body for the night, and he prayed they wouldn't attract attention. That much magic about his person was asking for trouble. Hopefully everyone would write it off as the costume.

Smoothing his hair for the last time, he turned and snagged a headache relief potion. Downing it quickly, he headed down the stairs, careful of his wings.

"Gabriell! Great, is everyone ready?" Hermione's bushy hair had somehow been tamed, and now hung in glossy curls down her back. He didn't dare ask how long it had taken her – he knew enough people with curly hair to know that such things did not bear thinking about.

All seven of them headed toward the Great Hall, laughing and talking excitedly. Brie had to admit that they cut a pretty striking picture – one of Ginny's year mates seemed to think so too as he stopped them to snap a group photo.

The Gryffindor table was awash in color and laughter. Knights and princesses mingled with centaurs and far more creative creatures. A few groups of friends at other tables showed their support of the masquerade tradition.

"So are we supposed to sing or something?"

"What?" Hermione turned to stare at Ron in surprise.

"Well, we're a choir, right? Are we supposed to sing?"

"I'd shoot myself," Ginny grinned. "Put you all out of the misery you'd be in if I tried to sing."

"I can't sing either," Dean announced.

"I can," Seamus said, "but I never bother to practice."

Neville blushed and shook his head when his friends sent him questioning glances.

"I can," Ron grinned.

"No you can't," Ginny gave her brother a funny look.

"Can too."

"Can not. You sound like a dying duck."

"No I don't!"

"You do, Ronald."

"I can't sing," Hermione interrupted the siblings' squabble.

They all turned to look at Brie. "Not as well as my sister," he informed them.

Neville choked at the idea of Ami singing, but Ginny grinned. "Sing something for us!"

Brie shook his head. He could carry a tune, but that was about it. "I don't know any songs," he demurred.

Conversation after that ranged over a variety of subjects, though Brie abstained from the banter even more than usual. The headache that had been building all week was pounding just behind his eyes, despite the powerful potion he'd taken.

Suddenly his entire body felt as though it were on fire. His blood was boiling in his veins and his skin was melting off his bones. He gritted his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut, trying to ride out the pain. Cruel laughter played through his mind and the green flash of the killing curse splashed the back of his eyelids. Somewhere in the distance, a woman screamed horror and defiance.

Pain seared his forehead, then dulled. Back in the present, he brought a trembling hand up to touch his forehead. The fingers he pulled away were coated with blood. Close by, a girl screamed.

A/N: It's Halloween – you didn't think I'd let him off the hook for his first Halloween at Hogwarts, did you?

A/N: Hr = Healer like Dr = Doctor

Chapter 18: Old Friends

L'hôpital de Slane, Quebec

Ami glanced up at the insistent tapping. Why couldn't they leave her be? She wished Healer Lydan would let her permanently transfer to R&D. She was wasted on those idiots in the Emergency Room. If they were stupid enough to get themselves sent to ER, then they ought to have to live with their mistakes.

With a purely internal sigh, Ami stood and opened the door. Looking coldly down at the Apprentice who dared to knock on her door, she waited in silence for the reason why she had been so rudely disturbed during her lunch break.

"Um, Hr Sinclair?" The Apprentice shifted nervously, carefully avoiding eye contact. So the rumor that Hr Sinclair would steal your soul if you looked her in the eyes was still going around. How amusing.

"Yes."

"There's... um... call, um, e-e-emer-emergency, um... From, um..."

Ami remained completely blank, but still managed to convey the imminent death of inarticulate Apprentices. He shrunk slightly and stuttered on.

"B-Britain!" he managed. "H-Hog-Hogwarts!"

Without so much as a twitch to indicate exactly how those words affected her, she headed down the hall toward the emergency Floo. The boy quickly got out of her way, seeming to debate whether or not he ought to follow her. Self-preservation won over protocol, and he intelligently retreated.

Hogwarts. An emergency call from Hogwarts specifically for her meant only one thing. Her brother was in trouble.

Again.

Stupid little twit. So much for lunch.

Hogwarts

Brie slowly lifted his head and stared across the table, eyes blank and unfocused. He was shaking all over, but he didn't notice. He hadn't even truly heard Ginny's shriek. His mind was still on that flash of green and that woman. He ached all over. Even his bones hurt. There was blood on his hand, and he wasn't quite sure where it came from. His head felt ready to explode.

"Gabriel? Merlin, Gabriel, are you alright?"

He turned toward Hermione, blinking to bring his eyes back into focus. She stared at him, obviously worried. He wanted to brush her off, to tell her that he was fine and that it wasn't any of her business, but all he could do was gaze at her dazedly.

"You should go to the Infirmary," Ron suggested from nearby. He sounded concerned as well, and Brie wanted to tell them all to go to Hell.

"Do you want me to get the Headmaster?" Hermione pressed. This time Brie managed to shake his head, even though it made his head split. He winced in pain, trying to hide his reaction.

"The Infirmary," Ron suggested again. "Come on, we'll help you."

Brie waved away the suggestion, then brought his hands up to rub his aching head. They came away smeared with more blood. So that answered where the blood was coming from.

His heart stopped.

The glamours! Had they broken? Could they all see his mangled face? What about THAT scar? Was he still safe?

He tried to force himself to his feet, but it didn't work. He remained sitting at the Gryffindor Table, hands clenched futilely around the edge of the bench.

"Here," Ginny handed a damp napkin to him, staring at him with wide eyes. "I'm sorry I screamed, you startled me," Ginny

commented as he took it and carefully wiped the blood from his hands.

After a moment to reorient himself, Brie forced himself to his feet, leaning heavily on his cane. Sheer will power was the only thing that kept him from collapsing at the pain coursing through his body.

He began the torturous walk toward the door, and Brie was extremely thankful that he'd gotten the other Gryffindors to move more toward the end of the Table. This walk was too long already. Suddenly Hermione appeared, wrapping her arm around his waist.

"Please," she said softly. "Let me help."

He almost pushed her away, angry at his own weakness. After a moment of internal struggle, he gave in. Getting away from any prying eyes was more important than wounding his pride. Pride could be salvaged later. His identity could not.

He allowed her to help support his weight as they walked, aware of what they probably looked like to anyone who saw them. They would deal with the rumors later.

As soon as they were outside the closed doors of the Great Hall he sagged, unable to keep hiding his trembling. He clenched his jaw tighter, refusing to allow any more weakness to show. Thankfully Hermione remained silent, and they continued toward the Infirmary.

The stone passageways blurred together as Brie forced himself to take one step after another. He'd been through worse than this. A lot worse. This was nothing compared to what they had done to him when he was a child. He forced these thoughts away. One step. Another.

They reached the Infirmary after what seemed like a lifetime. He winced as Hermione helped him lay back, then forced himself to relax his muscles. He closed his eyes and took a few steadying breaths.

"Mirror," he ground out.

Hermione looked surprised, but quickly complied. She handed him the Transfigured quill and he nearly cried out in relief. He was safe.

There was a little blood in his hair, but his glamours had held. He was safe.

"What happened?" Hermione asked, wringing her hands together and looking anxious. "Are you okay? Where's the blood coming from? Do you need me to fetch Madam Pomfrey? Can I get you anything? Oh, I'm so sorry! I noticed you weren't yourself earlier, I should've said something!"

He stared blankly as she babbled. Her words ran together, and his mind returned to the image he had in his mind of the beautiful red haired woman. He knew he'd seen her somewhere before.

Suddenly pain shot through him again. He bit his bottom lip in an attempt to keep from screaming, and only succeeded in drawing blood. A serpentine face rose in his mind, red eyes burning. With a mental cry, he slammed more power into his Occlumency shields. The face disappeared, a look of surprise and irritation gracing the noseless, lipless features. A second later the pain dulled, then died, leaving him with a pounding headache and post-Cruciatuus tremors.

Hermione had backed herself into a wall and was sobbing into her hands. He snarled at her, which only made her cry harder. What on earth was her problem?

Suddenly the door flew open, and Madam Pomfrey and the Headmaster appeared.

Ami stepped through the Floo into a small but well-kept school Infirmary. Her nose twitched slightly at the absence of the lemony antiseptics she insisted on using in her own work spaces. At least the room had decent lighting.

She took in the scene around her as she cast a few cleaning spells on herself to get rid of lingering soot. Her brother sat on a bed, his face tight with pain and anger. Answering emotions immediately roiled in the pit of her stomach, but she ignored them. A strangely dressed girl stood nearby, wringing her hands, crying as she argued with the gray-clad mediwitch. An old man with ridiculous orange robes stood behind the mediwitch, smiling gently at the others.

"(No)," Brie's voice was laced with pain and righteous anger – and was that fear? Ami's protective instincts kicked into high gear. "(Stay away from me.)"

"Please," the white robed girl said. "His sister is coming!"

"Miss Granger, your defense of your friend is admirable but extremely misguided. He is hurt and needs medical care. Please step aside and let Madam Pomfrey do her job." The old man's voice was persuasive and calm, and Ami instantly disliked him.

She had watched long enough. Stepping forward, she deliberately clicked her shoes against the stone floor. Four people turned to look at her, and she stared back icily. The girl shifted nervously, then backed out of the way.

"Who are you?" the mediwitch frowned, taking in the Healer's Greens.

"Ami!" The look on her brother's face as he said her name made a brief fantasy of crucioing these people play through her mind. Who had hurt him?

"Miss mal Théa?" the old man inquired, sounding oddly put out.

"Hr Sinclaire," she corrected coolly, glancing at him and then visibly dismissing him. "What happened?"

"I've been trying to get him –" a single glance stopped the mediwitch in her tracks.

"(My scar,)" Brie told her in Hindi. "(It bled.)"

Ami took in the information, easily hiding her surprise and anxiety. "I need a basin of warm water and a lemon," she announced, walking forward to join the throng around Brie's bed.

For a moment everyone stayed where they were, then the mediwitch began to move. She didn't seem too thrilled about some foreign Healer taking over her territory, but Ami was pleased to see that she wasn't going to let that get in the way of helping her patient.

The old man – Dumbledore, she assumed – hovered over the bed, a look of concerned compassion etched into his features. A little voice in Ami's head suggested nine ways to castrate him in less than three seconds, and she managed to keep her calm.

"You are too close to the bed," she informed him, stepping purposefully into his personal space. He took a step backward, looking slightly confused. She forced him back two more steps before she was satisfied.

"Girl," she turned to look at the last person present as the mediwitch returned with the water and the lemon. The brown haired girl wilted slightly under Ami's intense gaze, but refused to give in. Ami internally nodded in approval.

"You are dismissed. Take your Headmaster with you." With that, she turned back to her brother.

Under her cool stare, he lay back on the bed and closed his eyes. She took the water and lemon from the mediwitch and pulled a clean cloth from the pouch at her waist. It was already prepped with several common herbs that soothed and cleaned but didn't get in the way of later spells or potions. Squeezing the lemon into the water, she dipped in her cloth and began to wash Brie's face.

"Why the lemon?" the mediwitch asked curiously, craning her neck to see better.

"Boosts the herbs," Ami replied as practiced fingers probed where she knew her brother sported a lightning bolt shaped scar. He winced but remained silent. "I need Heinley's Solution."

"I don't have Heinley's," protested the woman, looking startled. Heinley's was common enough in Ami's ER, as it was mostly used in conjunction with cursed wounds, but she wasn't surprised that a school Infirmary didn't stock it. Curses nasty enough to need Heinley's weren't something most schoolchildren came in contact with.

"Get some," Ami returned mildly, turning to look the woman in the eyes. She shuddered and hurried away. As soon as she disappeared, Ami locked the door and pulled the curtains closed.

around her brother's bed. Casting a few wards for good measure, she sat down with Brie.

"(What happened?)" she asked in Hindi.

"(I've had a headache all week,)" he replied in the same language, voice laced with pain and fatigue. "(Right before dinner I took a dose of that stuff mama makes for me, but it didn't really help. Twenty minutes ago it felt like I was being crucioed. My scar started to bleed. Hermione helped me to the Infirmary. I had another attack, and I saw an Old Friend. I put my Occlumency shields up full and it stopped.)"

Inside, Ami boiled with emotion. Outside, she leaned down to press a kiss to his temple. He smiled slightly at the display of affection, but it turned into a grimace and he smoothed his face again. She ran over what he'd said, trying to figure out what best to do about it all. The fact that her proud baby brother admitted to needing help to get to the Infirmary was, in her eyes, a very bad sign.

"(Once you're settled, I'll have a talk with Shay. Keep your shields up.)"

Someone knocked on the door and Ami stood to unlock it, gazing coldly at the hook-nosed intruder. He was tall, with greasy black hair and sallow skin. There were several potion vials clutched in his arms, and Ami stood back to let him enter.

"Did you bring Heinley's?" she inquired, walking back over to her brother's bed.

"Yes. And a few others I thought might help. Poppy mentioned tremors and disorientation."

Ami gave a brief nod – as close as she would ever come to saying 'thank you' – and gestured for him to lay them on a nearby bed. "Post-Cruciatius?"

He wordlessly handed the potion to her, dark eyes unemotional as he watched her administer the potion to the dozing Brie. He didn't seem surprised by her first choice. He handed her Heinley's next, which she gently dabbed on the inflamed curse scar. Brie's glamours were extremely impressive, she had to admit.

"Dreamless Sleep," she ordered, and he went over to nearby cupboard to retrieve it for her. Again she nodded her thanks and gave it to Brie. "(Sleep, darling. All will be well come morning.)"

"What language is that?"

She turned back to the dark haired man, who was watching her with interest. "Hindi."

"I'm Severus Snape," he introduced, not seeming put off by her icy exterior.

"Wonderful," she gave him a little smile that in no way reached her eyes. "If you'll excuse me, my lunch break is over." With one last look at her sleeping brother, she stepped through the fire.

Hermione noticed Gabriel's reticence during dinner immediately, though she didn't understand it. Despite – or maybe because of – the Gryffindors backing off after the article, Gabriel had grown more relaxed. He was still taciturn, and he wasn't a good conversationalist by any means, but he'd loosened up enough that a smile or two could find their way onto his handsome face.

It was now abnormal for him to be completely silent during a meal.

She was the first one to notice when he hunched down and began trembling. She was also the first to notice the quite moans. Ginny was the first to notice the blood, and she announced her discovery by means of a surprised shriek. The noise attracted little attention in the general chaos, but it served to focus their group completely on the shivering French teenager.

The normally strong face had gone dead. She'd never realized how much of an expression Gabriel's 'not-expression' was. Without the normal aloof arrogance, he looked young and vulnerable.

Hermione watched as he stood, swaying slightly and obviously in pain. She was having trouble wrapping her mind around the situation, but several things were quite clear to her in that instant. One was that no matter what Gabriel did for his uncle, he didn't deserve this.

She moved forward without thinking, supporting Gabriel's weight from the side. For a second she thought he was going to push her away. She could almost see the moment that he swallowed his pride and let her help. He was heavier than she would've guessed, but she ignored it.

The trip to the Infirmary was hard for both of them, and Hermione got the feeling that her companion wasn't all there. She bit her tongue and helped him, grateful that she had made the others promise to stay behind. It was bad enough that she was seeing him like this – she would hate to think how he would feel if they all saw him stumbling weakly down the hall.

It was a relief to help him into one of the little white beds, and she immediately began looking around for Madam Pomfrey before remembering that the mediwitch was down at the Feast. She was surprised when he suddenly spoke up, but she transfigured him a mirror. He looked at his face for a minute, then seemed to collapse in relief. What had he been expecting to see?

Hermione wasn't a stupid girl. She'd realized that the reason they hadn't seen the blood on his face was that he must wear a glamour of some sort. What she didn't know was why he was wearing it in the first place. From his relief that it was still functioning, she had the feeling that it would not be very smart to ask questions about it. Instead, she babbled pointlessly about what had happened.

His second attack startled her. She was already feeling frayed around the edges, and seeing him bite through his lip as he thrashed was enough to bring her to tears. She was still crying when Madam Pomfrey and the Headmaster came in.

At first they didn't seem to notice her as they focused on Gabriel. He tried to glare at them, but his continued trembling stole the power from his implied threat.

"Oh dear, what's the matter?" Madam Pomfrey hurried closer, but stepped back when the boy pulled out his wand.

"Stay back," he snarled.

"That's not necessary, my boy," the Headmaster smiled at him, but Gabriel just sneered. "Put your wand down and let Madam Pomfrey take a look at you."

"Naomi," he ground out, voice tight. Hermione knew how much it must cost him to talk, and she felt her heart go out to him. "Maison."

That's right, Hermione remembered. His sister was a Healer. Neville was terrified of her.

"Your sister?" asked the Headmaster, voice conciliatory.

"L'hôpital de Slane," he informed them, looking straight at Hermione as he said it. She shuddered slightly at the look in his eyes. The two adults remained focused on the French boy as Hermione edged toward the Infirmary fireplace. It was set up to allow emergency calls for aid, which was precisely what Hermione planned to do.

Throwing a handful of Floo powder into the fire, she took a deep breath and shoved her head into the green flames. The bright bustle surprised her, and it took her a minute to realize that sun was pouring through the windows.

"Excuse me?"

A young man in rust colored robes started at the sound of her voice, turning to stare at her.

"Ah! Excusez-moi, mademoiselle. Que désirez-vous?"

Hermione blinked, mentally translating the French as best she could. "Uh, je... je voudrais Mr Naomi? There's an emergency," she added in English. "She's needed at Hogwarts."

"Hogwarts?" the boy looked taken aback and uneasy. "Mr Naomi Sinclair?"

"Oui!" Hermione nodded and the boy looked as if she had just signed his death warrant. "It's an emergency, la catastrophe," she urged.

"D'accord," the boy made a note on his clipboard, then turned and hurried away. Hermione pulled her head back out of the fire, feeling pleased with herself.

The scene she turned to find might have been amusing if it wasn't so startling. Madam Pomfrey was wrestling the severely weakened Gabriel for possession of his wand as the Headmaster looked on. There were a few scorch marks around the room, and Hermione was grateful that no stray curse had hit her.

The next few minutes passed in a blur. In a fit of Gryffindor bravado she stepped into the mess. Madam Pomfrey won the wand, but she was forced back by Hermione's sudden presence. Gabriel had better be grateful, Hermione thought later. She could easily have been suspended for her behavior on his behalf.

As it was, she was extremely glad when the woman arrived. She quickly stepped out of the fight, letting the new Healer take control. And take control she did.

She was of average height, though she gave the impression of being much taller than she was. Her face was cold and emotionless, and Hermione was put in mind of the 'carved of ice' cliché. Her hair was wound around her head in a braided crown, and her green robes swirled gracefully around her. Snape could learn a thing or two from her about intimidation, Hermione thought as she backed down under the woman's cruel gaze.

Gabriel's sister – the resemblance was striking – quickly asserted her dominance. She ordered Madam Pomfrey off without even thinking about it. She stared the Headmaster down, something Hermione didn't think was possible. Then she looked at Hermione.

It was all Hermione could do to stand up under the pressure of the woman's gaze. The weight of her personality was oppressive, and Hermione lacked the experience necessary to stand up to someone like her. She subconsciously copied Gabriel's aggressive stance, and could've sworn she felt the woman approve.

"Girl. You are dismissed. Take your Headmaster with you."

Hermione turned to look at Dumbledore with wide eyes. He gave Hr Sinclair one last suspicious glance, then turned to smile at her.

"Come my dear," he said gently, "let me walk you to the Tower. I'm sure Mr. mal Théa will be just fine, now."

They left the Infirmary and began walking toward Gryffindor Tower. The interrogation started almost immediately, and Hermione felt her emotions rising again. Firmly she forced them away. She'd done far too much crying already tonight – there was absolutely no need to start sobbing in front of Professor Dumbledore.

"What happened tonight?" he asked gently.

"Gabriel was quiet all evening," she admitted. "But during dessert he had some sort of attack. He was trembling and disoriented." Something stopped her from adding the part where he started bleeding from an unseen head wound. Normally she wouldn't hold back information from a teacher, but seeing him tonight, with Gabriel...

"I walked him to the Infirmary."

"Did you notice anything else? Anything unusual?"

She had a chance to come clean. She shook her head. "No, sir."

"You were very brave, defending your friend like that," he said finally. "I'm glad that he's been making friends. It's important that he feels welcome here."

"Yes sir," she responded, not really understanding what he was saying. She smiled weakly.

"Five points to Gryffindor," he added.

"Thank you, sir," she blushed.

"Goodnight, Miss Granger."

Hermione nodded, then hurried up the Tower stairs. She was more than ready to go to bed. It had been a long evening.

October 31, 1996

Uncle,

What was your old friend up to on Halloween?

-Ami

November 1, 1996

Ami,

Your letter surprised me. It was terse, even for you. As far as I know, nothing happened yesterday. I'll look into it for you.

-Shay

November 2, 1996

Ami,

You were right. My social club has been more active as of late, and on Halloween my old friend threw them a party. As you may remember, he's been ill for a long time. Right before the party he underwent treatment. You wouldn't recognize him. His recovery is quite miraculous, and he's eager to rejoin society. He's very pleased with my peers. My own prompt inquiry – thank you, niece – has led him to be just as pleased with me.

I apologize for it taking so long to get back to you, and I hope everything is all right. Have you spoken with Brie recently? I worry for him, especially when the weather changes like this. I know from experience that old battle wounds can act oddly. Keep an eye on your brother.

-Shay

A/N: Voldemort's resurrection is the reason Brie's scar bled – under normal circumstances it wouldn't do that. It isn't the first time that Voldie has gone probing for Harry Potter, and normally Brie's shields keep him out. This was far more intense, and Brie was in no way prepared for it.

Chapter Nineteen: All Saints Day

Carry yourself with pride, because you've earned it. Respect yourself, because you're worth it. Love yourself, because no one else will.

Our world requires a balance of Light and Dark. Too much of one, and chaos is inevitable. Sometimes we must do terrible things to keep the balance. Just remember who you are – you preserve that balance.

A common misconception is that Light and Dark are synonymous with Good and Evil. This is not so. Light or Dark, it doesn't matter – both are magic; objective, neutral, gray. Remember that it is not the magic that is Good or Evil. Magic is only a tool. A means to an end. You can not color the tool to reflect the hand that wields it.

The path our family walks is a lonely one. You have no friends, only acquaintances and allies. Your only enemies are those who oppose the balance. Respect those who provide the balance for the other side, because they, too, are your allies. You must respect them all, but do not care for them. Do not get attached. In the end, only your family will stay true.

You are to be cool, calm, distant. Be ice; avoid the fire of passion. You are to be patient and poised. Be focused, subtle, strong. Be cunning and charismatic. You are first and foremost a balancer. You are mal Théa.

- Excerpt from a 1991 letter from Akshay Lord mal Théa to his nephew, Gabriel mal Théa.

Brie rejoined the student body the next day. He was pleased to note that none of the new rumors circulating had to do with his mysterious illness. There were several about an illicit romance between Hermione and himself, but he couldn't care less about those.

Of course, his Gryffindor posse was another matter.

"Hey mate, how're you feeling?"

Brie looked over at his chess partner as they headed down for breakfast. His minions had been gratifyingly quiet about the whole affair, and he was loath to break the silence. He really didn't want to be pestered with questions. Not for the first time he wondered how much detail Hermione had shared.

"Better," he said shortly.

"What happened?" Neville inquired, hurrying slightly to keep up with Brie's longer strides.

Brie's mouth thinned and he gave his friend a disapproving look. Neville looked away.

"Yeah, what happened?" Ginny asked, turning to look over her shoulder at them. "Hermione wouldn't tell us anything!"

In front of them, Hermione ducked her head and sped up. Brie's heart warmed a little. It was nice to see that even these meddlesome Gryffindors had some sense of decorum. It was unexpectedly nice to find that the bushy haired girl would keep her mouth shut on his behalf.

"Nothing of consequence," he said, attempting to brush off the whole episode.

"Nothing of... Gabe, you were bleeding!" Ginny gaped.

Brie's eyes narrowed. "Do. Not. Call me that. Ever."

"What?" Ginny was thrown off track and almost tripped in surprise. She turned around to walk facing forward again.

"Why not?" prompted Hermione, eager to change the subject.

"Just don't," he insisted. "Or should I call you Hermy?"

Hermione choked slightly as everyone else started laughing. "I see," she blushed.

"What is it your Ravenclaw buddies call you?" asked Seamus, walking a little behind Brie. "They don't call you Gabriel."

"Brie," he replied calmly. "They call me Brie."

"Brie? I like it," smiled Ginny. "Can we call you Brie?"

Brie was silent for a minute as they walked into the Great Hall toward their usual spots at the end of their Table. Did he want them to call him by his special name? He didn't mind Anya using it, because she was always around Levi, and of course Levi used it – but did he really want this group of Gryffindors to?

"I would prefer you didn't," he finally decided as they sat. It was a diplomatic enough answer, he thought. He wouldn't get mad if they did – he loved the name – but to him it signified a closeness that he didn't necessarily feel with his Housemates. Maybe someday he'd be comfortable with them using it, but not yet.

With that, conversation turned to other matters. He shared a glance with Hermione, in which he attempted to communicate some level of gratitude that she had kept her mouth shut. She blushed and looked away, turning to reply to something Ginny had said. He hoped she understood – he didn't think he could bring himself to overtly thank her.

Herbology was as dull as ever. Blaise made small talk about angelology and the irony of someone with the name Gabriel masquerading with a halo. Professor Sprout seemed completely unaware of anything going on at their table, and it was easy to trade witty barbs. At the end of class they exchanged little smiles as they parted.

Lunch was an onerous task, as Levi and Anya fully expected a detailed explanation of what had happened the night before. One minute they had been debating over the validity of Faust, the next they were looking for a friend that wasn't there. Levi had been inclined to fear the worst, but Anya had pointed out that Brie was running around in an angel costume – he was probably just anxious to retire.

Nevertheless, Levi had tracked down Neville and demanded an explanation of where his cousin had disappeared. Neville told him about going to the Infirmary, but by the time the Ravensclaws got there Brie was sleeping. Brie declined to give them their explanation, pointing out that it was hardly the time or place for such a

conversation. They had subsided with the promise of details at a later date.

"Alright class, pair up," snapped a grumpy Sirius Black. There were dark bags under his bloodshot eyes, and his clothing was more disheveled than normal. He was slouching, and his usual cheerfulness was nowhere to be seen. He looked tired and hung over.

He hated Halloween with a passion, especially when it fell during the week. Normally he called in sick the day after so that he could sleep off the inevitable hangover that came with drowning your sorrows in whiskey. He'd had no such luck this time, as Dumbledore had quite firmly told him that he would be in his class and teaching, or he would suffer nameless horrors. Not in the mood for unknown horrors, he'd chosen to face those he knew. This time in the form of his sixth years.

The class quickly paired up, looking slightly cowed by their professor's unusual temper. Sirius's eyes followed the mal Théa boy, whose casual arrogance reminded him so painfully of James. He imagined the boy as a little bit scrawnier, with messy hair and pale skin. He closed his eyes and forced his thoughts back to the task before him.

Class. Right.

"You need to practice wordless spells," he informed the class. "One partner will shoot curses and the other will attempt to block them. First and second year curses only. Begin."

There was a minute of blessed silence before the class noisily got to work. Soon the noise died down as the students concentrated on casting spells without saying the words. Every once in awhile a student slipped up and spoke their spell out loud, but more often the students simply failed to cast anything at all.

Mal Théa had the Weasley boy dancing a jig under constant wordless fire, and Granger was demonstrating techniques to Thomas and Finnegan. Most of the Hufflepuffs were getting mixed results, though they seemed to have better luck with the defensive spells. Rzaeva wasn't casting any defensive spells, but was doing

just fine with her attack. The Longbottom boy couldn't seem to cast anything at all.

After only a few minutes of truly watching the students, Sirius let his thoughts drift. It had been fifteen years. Fifteen years since James and Lily had fallen to that madman, betrayed by a man they thought was their friend. And it's my fault, Sirius thought to himself. If only I hadn't convinced James to switch...

Usually Sirius was too practical for such thoughts. Years of distance and reassurance from Remus and the Headmaster had taught him that he really wasn't to blame for what had happened that night. On Halloween, however, he was allowed to wallow in self pity. And on the day after. Often for the entire week.

He jerked slightly as a spell hit him in the chest. Maybe things weren't so bad, he thought. Maybe he just needed to put things into perspective. Yes, James and Lily were gone – but getting depressed wasn't going to change that. He smiled cheerfully as his thoughts turned toward happy memories of all the good times they'd had together.

Somewhere in the back of his mind he wondered about the sudden mood swing and quickly identified it as a cheering charm. Some kid had the guts to throw a cheering charm at him! Fancy that. That was nice of them – he really needed a pick up. He beamed out at the class and refocused his attention. He had responsibilities, and Lily would kill him if he messed this up!

As soon as Charms ended, Brie hurried back to the Tower. He wanted to leave for the Forest as soon as possible – he was sick of being confined in Hogwarts. Before he could disappear up into the boy's dorm, he felt a small hand close around his arm. He jerked slightly, spinning around, hands poised to deliver a crushing blow to his assailant.

Hermione backed up a few steps, brown eyes wide and hands raised. With a deep breath, he lowered his arms and straightened again.

"Yes?" he inquired mildly.

"I, um, I," she blinked, stuttering uncharacteristically.

Brie mentally grimaced. She'd probably never had someone seriously raise their hand to her in her life. He quirked an eyebrow sardonically, unwilling to show any sign of apology for a reaction he'd worked hard to maintain.

"I was hoping you'd help me with the Potions essay," she said in a rush. "You usually disappear so quickly over the weekend, and, well, I could really use your insight."

Brie stood silently for a moment, watching her fidget slightly under his scrutiny. He was tempted to tell her no – he hated studying. He would much rather be training out in the Forest. But he owed her. She had helped him last night. She had called his sister, but more importantly, she had kept her mouth shut. Anyone else he could have refused without a trace of guilt.

"Very well," he agreed. She smiled up at him, earlier near-hit apparently forgotten as she began chattering away about the different possibilities the essay presented. He followed her back down to the common room with great reluctance.

Levi blushed slightly as he watched Anya bending over her books. A few stray strands of her chocolate brown hair had escaped her bun, framing her face in a way Levi found charming. He knew he had a crush on her. He'd had a crush on her for almost a month now. As far as he could tell, she was perfect. She was smart, well-read, and had no qualms about sharing her opinions. Her world-view was charmingly cynical, though it could be staggeringly optimistic at the oddest of times. Her smile, though rare, lit up her face. She was too strong-featured to be called pretty, but she was handsome enough.

She would make a wonderful wife.

All he needed to do was convince Grandfather of the fact. And Anya herself, of course.

Grandma Miriam would be on his side. She was a product of a multicultural marriage, and she was fond of the *mal Théa* tradition of marrying outside the old French bloodlines. He'd already started writing her and Grandfather letters about his growing friendship with the Russian girl. They both expressed pleasure that he was making

friends, and it was only a matter of time before Grandma caught on to his increasing regard for his new friend.

"Levi?"

He blinked, startled out of his daydream as the object of his regard called his name again.

"Oui?"

"I was wondering if you were going home for the winter holidays."

"Part of them," he admitted. "I will be staying with Brie until the Yule Ball, but after that we will both head back to France."

"So you'll be going to the Ball?" she asked curiously.

"I'm only a Third Year," he reminded her, hiding his personal disappointment in that fact. If only he'd been a Fourth Year, he could've asked her. That would've made things a lot easier.

"Well, would you like to come with me?"

"Eh?" Amber eyes widened slightly as he stared at her. She blushed slightly, then shook her head.

"Never mind," she muttered.

"Non, non, je voudrais – I would very much love to go with you," he gave her a slow smile.

"Good," she smiled back. "That's settled then. Now how do you pronounce this?" she thumped a large French phrase book in front of him, and they fell to work. Inside, Levi did a little jig. Maybe, just maybe, Anya liked him too.

It was getting close to dinner time and they were still working on the Potions essay. It was even trickier than she'd thought it would be, and Gabriel was just making it worse. Oh, he was trying to be helpful, and she was learning loads, but he just had so much information! She would come to a conclusion that everything she knew supported, and then he would wave it away with some new tidbit that she'd never encountered.

It was maddening.

It was also fascinating, and she was enjoying herself immensely. Even Gabriel seemed to be enjoying himself to some extent. At least, he enjoyed getting her riled up. She got the feeling that he took pleasure in listening to her build assumptions that he could topple as soon as she reached her 'masterful' conclusion.

"But the dittany and the belladonna can't be mixed over the flame!" she argued his latest attempt to ruin her thesis. "It would render the potion useless."

"Unless the potion has salt."

"What?" Hermione turned to stare at the lounging French boy. He was leaning back on the couch, eyes closed and obviously at ease. She knew he was doing it to irritate her, and it was working. "What does salt have to do with anything?"

"Table salt, to be precise," he continued idly. "Sodium chloride. It has the most interesting effects when added at certain stages of brewing."

"I've never read that anywhere," she accused half-heartedly. The first dozen times she'd been goaded into saying that, she had really meant it. Now she was becoming resigned to the fact that he just had access to more obscure information than she did. It was why she'd asked him for help, after all.

"Of course not," he scoffed. "It was only just published last week. Mother was ecstatic."

"I still don't see what that has to do with the dittany and belladonna."

Gabriel's explanations were always clear and concise – once you got him to give them. He took some sadistic pleasure in dancing around the subject. Making you work for it, she supposed. She didn't really mind – again, she found it fascinating and educational – but at the same time it was a little frustrating when he got her so side tracked that she couldn't remember the original question.

She turned back to her essay notes with a little huff. A note about the table salt was added, and she began adding up all the information she had. Did she have an essay yet?

"You done with that essay yet?" Ron asked curiously from his spot near the fire. His own books were spread out in front of him, but a Quidditch magazine covered them.

"She's not writing an essay," Neville groaned from a nearby chair. "She's writing a bloody book!"

Seamus grunted from where he was frantically trying to keep up with Hermione and Gabriel's discussion. Dean had long since given up in favor of writing the usual crap. His excuse was they always got failing grades anyways, so there was no sense in wasting the effort.

"Oh hush," Hermione huffed. "So, salt. Now what about the lacewings?"

Gabriel launched into a series of quick explanations, all of them containing information geared to make Hermione bristle and snap. She obliged, to his obvious pleasure, and continued to pester him with questions. If he wouldn't flat out tell her anything, then by Merlin she was going to make him stick around until midnight!

"Bwhee!"

Hermione's head shot up, startled by the childish cry of delight. Gabriel had reacted instantaneously, and was already off the couch and kissing a strange man's cheeks while a little girl clamored for attention at their feet.

The young man was tall, topping Gabriel by a good two inches. He was lean and looked ridiculously skinny next to the broad shouldered teen. Sandy blonde hair that was just long enough to fall into the man's eyes brushed against stylish wire frame glasses. A goatee framed his smiling mouth and made Hermione hesitate to over-guesstimate his age.

Three things greatly surprised Hermione about the new situation. The first was the fact that a strange man – and a strange little girl – had managed to get into the Gryffindor common room. Second was

the familiar way he and her friend had greeted each other. Third was the fact that the man was dressed casually in Muggle attire.

"Gabby," the man smiled easily, "it's wonderful to see you again." He wasn't exactly handsome, Hermione decided, but she liked him anyways.

"Kali, Aud. I'm not a little kid anymore," Gabriel glared at the man, but it seemed half-hearted at best. Hermione noted that if she ever tried calling him 'Gabby,' he would probably never speak to her again. The man just laughed.

"Right. Of course you aren't – and you probably don't need me checking up on you, either. But orders are orders," he heaved a sigh, and Gabriel relented with a smile.

"Bwhee!" the little girl at their feet tugged on Gabriel's pant leg, trying to get his attention. When he looked down, she reached up her hands and bounced. Hermione stared as the scariest teenager she'd ever met bent down and scooped the little girl up in his arms with what could only be described as adoration on his face.

She was a cute kid. Probably no more than two, with wispy black curls tied up in a pink bow. Her little white coat had matching bows, as did her white shoes. What could be seen of her dress was a matching shade of pink. She had bright grey eyes and a smile that Hermione found hard to resist.

"It's my little Warrior Princess! You've gotten so big! Audric, what in Kali's name are you feeding this kid?" Both men laughed as Gabriel lifted the kid up over his head and she squealed in delight.

"Your guess is as good as mine," the man – Audric, apparently – shrugged.

"I feast on de sou's of de innocent," she informed them happily as Gabriel brought her down to balance on his hip.

"I'll bet you do," he grinned.

Hermione and the other Gryffindors watched the unfolding scene with baited breath. It was surreal, and was quickly venturing into the realms of suspended disbelief. Hermione found herself wondering

who on earth these people were, and what other sides of Gabriel mal Théa were hidden behind his cold warrior persona.

"So, The Bitch sent you?" Gabriel turned back to Audric, bouncing the child skillfully on his hip.

"Please don't call her that where Tayce can hear you," Audric groaned. "You know how seriously she takes this mothering thing."

Gabriel grinned. "Has she parroted me recently?"

"Not recently."

"Bitch!" crowed the little girl, clapping her hands. Gabriel burst out laughing as his friend groaned piteously. "Bitch, bitch, bitch!"

"Um, Gabriel?" Neville spoke up uneasily from where he was standing by his armchair. "Sorry to interrupt and everything, but as prefect... Um, you, uh, know only Gryffindors..." he gave the man an apologetic look. "Sorry Mr. Sinclair."

"It's alright," the man gave him an easy smile. "Longbottom, right?" Neville nodded, pink with embarrassment. "Well Mr. Longbottom, not to worry. I have permission from your Headmaster to be here."

He pulled a piece of parchment out of the pocket of his jeans and handed it to Neville. Neville inspected it, then nodded and handed it back.

"It's nice to see you again, Mr. Sinclair," he added a bit more cheerfully.

"You too." The man's eyes flicked over the rest of the gaping Gryffindors, then turned back to Gabriel. "So Gabby, are you going to introduce me to your friends?" he goaded, grinning brightly.

"Minions," Gabriel corrected absently as he cast his own rapidly cooling gaze over the group. Hermione spluttered slightly at being termed a minion, but was a bit too in shock to speak up. She filed it away for later.

"You've met Neville Longbottom. That's Seamus Finnegan. The redhead is Ronald Weasley. The girl is Hermione Granger. Sadly enough, she reminds me of you. Ami seemed to like her."

Hermione got the oddest feeling that she had just been given a huge compliment, though she was pretty sure Gabriel was wrong about his sister's opinion of her.

"Everyone, this is my brother, Audric Sinclair, and my niece, Tayce-Avice."

Brother? They looked nothing alike. Hermione puzzled over it for half a second before remembering that the cold woman from last night had said she was 'Hr Sinclair' – she must be married to this man, which would actually make the two brothers-in-law. Her internal dilemma solved, Hermione returned her full attention to the drama unfolding in the Gryffindor common room.

After a brief round of hellos, Audric turned back to Gabriel.

"Have you finished those commentaries yet?" he inquired, apparently out of the blue. "Mrs. Glyn has been pestering me about them for the past two weeks. Apparently she needs them by Wednesday."

"I'm almost done. I just have to finish the editing on the Lawrence Memoir."

"How long will that take you?"

"An hour, max," Gabriel shrugged dismissively.

"Wonderful. I still have an hour until I need to get back to the Candle. Why don't you take Tayce up and finish those. Your friends can keep me company." He smiled gently as Gabriel gave him a suspicious look.

"Did Ami..."

"No. Go on. I'm sure Tayce would love to play with your gun."

Gabriel's smile seemed more reflexive than anything, but he hefted the girl higher on his hip and headed off toward the dorm without another word to their group.

"My little warrior princess will be a fine assassin some day, won't she," they heard him saying as he climbed the stairs.

Audric silently watched him disappear up the stairs before turning piercing gray eyes on the gathered students. He smiled as he fixed his gaze on Hermione. She met his stare straight on without flinching. After all, he wasn't really all that intimidating. He had nothing on his brother-in-law.

"Miss Granger," he gave her a polite nod. "I've heard so much about this school, but this is the first time I've been inside. I would be honored if you would show me around." He offered her a hand to help her off the floor, and she got the impression that she was not being asked. She glanced at Neville, who nodded. He thought this Audric Sinclaire was safe, at least. She looked back at the man in question, then accepted his hand. He smiled at her as he pulled her to her feet.

"It was a pleasure meeting you all," he informed the gathered group. "I'll return your friend in an hour. If Gabriel gets done before we get back, please tell him to wait here for me. Miss Granger?" he gallantly offered her his elbow, and with a slight blush she took it and followed him out the portrait hole. As soon as it closed behind them, Audric turned to fix her with an intense stare.

"Miss Granger, we need to talk."

"(French)"

Chapter Twenty: Friendship, or Something Like It.

Brie absently fished his gun out from under his pillow as he settled his little niece on the bed. When he had both hands free, he emptied the gun of bullets and double checked that it was safe. Tayce watched him, her gray eyes wide with excitement. She loved playing with his guns, especially the ones that were enchanted for indoor practice and shot charmed pellets. He had some of those somewhere in his trunk, but this one would do for now.

"(Now Tayce, what's the rule about playing with Uncle Brie's guns?)"

"On'y shoo' at imama-inama-inanina," she frowned in frustration, trying to wrap her little tongue around the big word.

"Inanimate," Brie prompted gently.

"Imamimate," she agreed. "On'y shoo' at imamimate objec's an' idiots."

"(That's my girl,)" he ruffled her hair and handed her the gun. She squealed happily, struggling to lift the heavy gun and aim it out the window.

"Pow!" she cried as he pulled out the books that Audric wanted. "Pow! Pow! Pow!"

"Hit anything yet?" he inquired as he flipped through the books to double check that he'd gotten everything he'd meant to.

"Oui! I 'it a birdie, an' a robber, an' a Qui'itch p'ayer, an' two Englishmen."

"But you've only shot four bullets! How can you have hit five things?"

"Mama says I'm specia' tha' way," she informed him dryly as she took aim and fired again. "Pow!"

Brie finished the books and got up to look through his trunk for his specialty guns. They weren't play guns, per se – they could be as lethal as the one Tayce held when loaded with the correct potion

capsules. The capsules he loaded now simply shot colored balls of paint. Rai had developed them after playing Muggle paint ball with her best friend.

"Now let's see what we hit for real," Brie grinned as he traded guns with his niece. Tayce tried to look menacing, but only succeeded in looking more adorable. With lots of laughter, the two began shooting around the room as Brie transfigured targets out of the other boys' belongings. After all, if they left them cluttering up the dorm then they had to suffer the consequences.

It wasn't until the door opened that Brie realized how long they'd been playing.

Neville stared down at the three blue splotches of paint clustered near his heart, then over at the yellow paint that had struck the wall over his shoulder.

"Did... did I come in at a bad time?"

"Miss Granger, we need to talk. We owe each other that much, at least."

"Oh?" Hermione blinked at the intense young man. "I don't even know you."

She wanted to add and I don't owe you anything, but she refrained. She was already off balance in this encounter, and she'd just as soon not anger the stranger. Especially when said stranger was married to the woman she had met last night.

"No," Audric agreed, sounding genuinely sympathetic. "Nor do I know you – which means I don't know what you need to hear." He looked at her thoughtfully, and Hermione got the impression that he was attempting to look through her at something. She pulled her eyes away from his compelling stare.

"Right. Um, you wanted to see Hogwarts?" She quickly began walking away from the deserted hall, down toward the more populous portions of the school. They walked in silence for awhile before Audric spoke up again.

"I understand you were the one who called Ami last night. I'm sure she never thought to thank you, just as I'm sure Gabriel relegated his gratitude to actions rather than words. Sometimes it's nice to hear it out loud, though. For all of us, thank you."

"It was nothing," Hermione blushed. Secretly she admitted that it was nice to hear the words, though she had already figured out that the essay help was her friend's way of saying thanks.

"Maybe," the man's smile was deep and mysterious, and somehow sad. "Maybe not." They walked in silence for a dozen feet.

"You didn't come here to thank me," Hermione finally blurted out, anxious to get the weird encounter over with. She still wasn't comfortable being alone with mal Théa's brother.

"No," he smiled again, but the smile faded quickly. "I need you to tell me about yesterday. It is very important."

"Why?"

"You're a smart girl," Audric shrugged. "Gabriel speaks highly of you. You even managed to impress my wife, which is no mean feat."

Hermione blushed, but kept her confused silence.

"Miss Granger," he finally sighed, "I need your help. You were there, and I was not. Please."

"Gabriel wants me to keep my mouth shut about it," she hedged.

The man's expression warmed, and his smile was sincere. "I'm glad that you understand that need. However," his face turned serious in an eye blink. "I am his brother. He has no secrets from me."

"Brother-in-law," argued Hermione, face pink. Audric shrugged again.

"He is mal Théa – technicalities like that hardly matter to them."

"It's his secret to tell," she countered half-heartedly.

"He told Ami as much as he knew, and thus he told me. Trust me, Hermione Granger. If he objected to you telling me, he would not have taken Tayce away to leave us time to speak together."

"But he said –"

"There is no Memoir to finish. It has been done for weeks, he simply hasn't bothered to give it to me yet."

"Oh." Hermione fell silent, thinking. Would it hurt to tell him? No, she decided. In fact, it would help her to talk it out with someone. Some parts of the evening still struck her as very bizarre. With a deep breath, she began to explain that evening as she had experienced it.

"...so I'm positive he's wearing a glamour of some sort, and a strong one at that. I mean, it held when he started bleeding and everything. I just can't for the life of me figure out what he's hiding!" she finished explosively.

Audric watched her curiously as she waved her hands in the air. Like Ami and Brie, he was quite impressed with the girl. She played it down, but she had kept her head in a tough situation, had helped Brie gracefully exit despite knowing the sort of rumors that would crop up, had taken the initiative and called Ami, and through it all had been observant enough to draw certain correct conclusions about Gabriel mal Théa. And then she had kept her mouth shut afterward.

Audric was impressed indeed, but he was also worried. She knew more than she ought to, and if she was anything like him, which Brie indicated was the case, it was only a matter of time before she'd rooted through enough books to come up with an answer.

It had happened before, of course – people had started asking questions and had made their own answers. None of them had included the Boy-Who-Lived, but they wouldn't always be so lucky – especially here in Britain, where Harry Potter was a household name. They had been lucky so far, but one thing the mal Théas taught you very quickly was that it was really stupid to rely on luck.

Well, actually Ami's saying was, "You are a blithering idiot if you rely on luck when you could bribe, maim, kill, and otherwise politely convince people to see things your way."

Bribing might even work on the Granger girl. Oh, not money. She was too honorable for that. Knowledge, however, was a coin that even Audric was hard put to resist. Give her enough true information to satisfy her curiosity, and she wouldn't feel the need to research it herself.

Of course, he realized it was only a patch job. He knew his brother well enough to know that it was only a matter of time before the boy did something to warrant more curiosity. Then no amount of information would sate Hermione Granger's curiosity until she knew it all. It was a charming personality trait in someone who learned things for you. It was extremely annoying and sometimes downright dangerous when they started getting curious about you.

So he needed to throw her a proverbial bone.

Hermione fell silent, twisting her hands together as she waited for Audric to say something. She'd said more than she'd meant to. It had felt so good to finally be telling someone, though! To be able to verbalize everything that had been going through her head... She always thought best out loud and she had gotten a bit carried away.

"You're right."

"Eh?" Hermione looked over at Audric in surprise. He turned to meet her gaze, and she was surprised by the magnitude of emotions he projected.

"You're right – he does wear a glamour."

"Oh." What was she supposed to say to that? Ask what it covered? That would be horribly impolite. After all, if he was wearing a glamour in the first place, it probably meant that he didn't want other people to see whatever it was he was hiding.

"I understand that you're becoming... friends with my brother."

"Of a sort," she agreed warily. "On my part, at least."

"Oh, on his as well. It's quite obvious that he dotes on you."

"It is?" she stared at him. He laughed, a warm, rich sound that made her smile hesitantly back.

"Oh, don't mistake the brusque-soldier act for anything but that - an act. He's got plenty of feelings, he just learned to hide them early on. With a childhood like his, he learned very early." Audric's voice dropped and he sounded sad again.

"What do you mean?" From everything she'd heard about the mal Théa family, it was completely ideal! Maybe not a normal childhood, but nothing that would merit that tone of voice.

"You must understand, Miss Granger," Audric began earnestly, "that not everything is as it seems, especially on the outside. In Gabriel's case, this is more applicable than normal. Brie..." he trailed off, searching for words. Hermione let him think, fascinated by his idle motions.

"Brie was abused," he murmured. "Within an inch of his life, until Rai rescued him. That's why he wears the glamours. That's why he wears long sleeves and turtlenecks. It's also why he carries a cane. He'll carry those scars with him for the rest of his life, along with scars that go much deeper."

"That's awful," Hermione choked, face pale as she stared at Audric. Gabriel? Abused? She had trouble picturing it, but then her mind flashed to his boggart... No wonder he could imagine such horrible things done to children.

Audric shrugged, grimacing slightly. "Unfortunately, that's life. He won't talk about it, of course, even with us. Understandably he doesn't want anyone to know. I'm trusting you, Miss Granger. I'm not sure you can fully comprehend how much I am trusting you."

Hermione shook her head, unable to think of anything to say. She wanted to ask why the mal Théas hadn't raised him from the beginning when he was obviously related to them somehow. Why had 'Rai' needed to rescue him. And why on earth were they trusting her with this information? She didn't for one minute believe that they went around telling everybody who impressed them even a little bit of this.

"You have questions," Audric smiled. "I'm happy to answer anything for you, but we're out of time." Hermione noticed abruptly that they were in the hall leading back up to the Tower. "Owl me after you've put your thoughts in order. I'll answer anything you ask me, I promise you."

"Thank you," she said, not sure what else she ought to say. It would take a while for the new information to assimilate. By tomorrow evening she would be writing him, though. She gave the Fat Lady the password and they both walked into the Gryffindor common room.

Hermione took one look at the happily chattering Gryffindors and decided it was time to call it a night. She bid her friends good night, thanked Audric one last time, then drifted up to the girls' dorm. Sleep was probably a very good idea. She'd finish that essay in the morning.

The boys stared around their dorm room in shock. There was paint everywhere. Their trunks, beds, walls, ceiling – everything was polka-dotted blue and yellow. Gabriel had been completely unrepentant about the whole situation, and was currently reclining on his spot-free bed.

The Sinclaires had left half an hour ago, and the boys had finally decided that it was time for bed. They hadn't expected their beds to be saturated in paint.

"Hey, Gabriel?" Ron turned to look at his chess partner as the other boy hummed acknowledgement. "What happened in here?"

"Target practice," Gabriel replied genially. "It's best to start them early."

"Right. Let's not go there – but I'd really appreciate a clean bed. We all would."

"Yes," Gabriel agreed, though he made no move to clean the paint, or even suggest a way for them to do it themselves.

"So..."

"So?"

"Would you please do something about the bloody mess you made of our room?"

"Oh, this isn't bloody at all," Gabriel smiled cheerfully. "You should've been there when The Bitch taught me human anatomy. That was bloody. I would recommend killing the specimen before cutting him open if you ever decide to take a look – even I found the mess a little distasteful. Now, a good clean beheading – that's much better."

The boys gagged, and there was no further talk of making Gabriel do anything all.

Gabriel was gone before anyone else woke up that morning. Off to train in the Forest, as usual, so Hermione was left to puzzle through the rest of her essay alone. In the end she managed quite nicely, and even had to edit out nearly a foot of solid information. Snape always bitched when she went over even half an inch, though, so she had to be careful.

Actually, Hermione was kind of glad that Gabriel was gone. She appreciated having a chance to assimilate everything that Audric had told her before having to deal with the subject of their conversation. It was still so hard to think of Gabriel as anything but strong and fierce. Abused? Never.

At the same time, though, she could see it. In the stiffness and the unwillingness to let anyone too physically close. She remembered Neville's comment about getting his arm broken, and she thought back to all the other times when people ventured into Gabriel's personal space. He was always hyper aware of their presence – she'd noticed it when she'd helped him out of the Great Hall the other night.

Would he talk to her about it? She got the impression from Audric that it wasn't a good topic to bring up with him. After all, in his position she wouldn't want other people asking prying questions – it was so innately personal, after all. She didn't really have any right to the information. Her only excuse was curiosity. A bit of concern mixed in, of course, but there was nothing that she could do to help. Only hurt, if she started bringing up bad memories for the boy.

Setting her finished essay aside, she began a letter to Audric instead.

The weekend passed quickly and quietly, without further incident. Brie came back Sunday afternoon, took a shower, then settled into the common room to work on his homework. The other boys were avoiding him, still somewhat miffed about the paint in the dorm. He and Hermione discussed their upcoming Ancient Runes project until dinner, and by evening Ron was ready for a game of chess. Brie won, bringing the tally to 9 – 12 in Ron's favor.

Monday morning brought pounding rain and a biting chill to the castle. Brie was no stranger to the rain – he'd been raised in the Mountains, after all – but he hated it anyways. It made his legs ache, which invariably made him irritable. At home everybody knew to give him space on rainy days. Here, no one knew better.

"How did you sleep?" Hermione inquired as she sat down next to him for breakfast. He grimaced, but didn't say anything. "I slept well," she commented after the silence grew uncomfortable. He hummed at her, and she left him alone after that.

He slept through Charms. Professor Flitwick didn't notice, and Hermione seemed disinclined to bother him for some reason. He made a mental note to find out what Audric had said to her. History was somewhat harder to bear.

It had been two months, and Professor Binns had gotten worse, if that was possible. Two months of listening to the most fascinating subject taught in Hogwarts get murdered by a ghost – who logically should be more interesting, as he probably lived through at least some of what he was teaching. Two months of bottling up dissatisfaction mixed poorly with nasty weather, and Brie stood up in class.

Hermione jumped slightly as she felt Gabriel shift beside her. He'd been grumpy all morning and had even slept through Charms. Any of the other Gryffindor boys, she would've smacked upside the head to wake up. After what she'd heard from his brother, though... She let him sleep. It was his grade, after all.

She stared as he stood up, clearing his throat to catch Binns's attention. The ghost trailed off, blinking slowly at the disturbance. No

one ever stood up in his class – no one even raised their hands. What was Gabriel doing?

"You're mistaken," he said calmly. A few people around them began waking up and paying attention.

"Excuse me?"

"You are mistaken," Gabriel repeated slowly. "The Goblin rebellion of 1515 was orchestrated by Hillian – a young wizard who had a strong alliance with the Goblins of the time. They trained him as a war mage, and he repaid them by slipping them information about the Ministry. It turned out that the information was mostly false, of course, but Hillian got to test out his skills in a real war."

"Young man—"

"Igar the Irritable had nothing to do with leading the rebellion," continued Gabriel, obviously on a roll. "In fact, he wasn't even born until nearly 20 years after the Hillian debacle. He had nothing to do with any of the rebellions – he was a scholar, not a warrior."

"I think you—"

"Hickhook – who was known among the Goblins as 'the Honorable,' not 'the Horrid' – is the one who found out about Hillian's betrayal. He began negotiations with the wizards – he's the reason that so many of the Goblins' PoWs made it out alive. The Longbottoms," here he nodded to the slack-jawed Neville, "for example, owe the continued existence of their family line to Hickhook."

"Young man, I really must protest," blustered the old ghost.

"No, ghost," Gabriel verbally sneered as his face remained smooth. "I really must protest. History is fact. It is immutable. You cannot alter it to suit a xenophobic agenda and it's frankly criminal the way you gloss over anything even remotely interesting about the history of magical Europe." Gasps echoed around the room, but Gabriel ignored them all.

Hermione didn't know what to think. On the one hand, Gabriel seemed knowledgeable on the subject. He spoke with the confidence of someone who knew the material better than the back

of his hand. On the other, he was attacking authority. Still, she couldn't help but internally cheer him on as he crusaded for a more challenging course.

When she had first started at Hogwarts, she was looking forward to History class most of all. It would be something familiar – Muggles learned a different history, true, but it was still history – and it would teach her about the new culture in which she lived. She had been extremely disappointed when they had their first class.

"Detention," the old ghost announced to another chorus of gasps. Professor Binns never issued detention to anyone.

"No," shot back Gabriel. He collected his books under incredulous stares. "I signed up for a History of Magic class, not whatever rubbish this class is trying to indoctrinate into the sleeping minds of your students. You have nothing to offer me which I could not fish out of a garbage can."

Without another word, he swept out of the room, his cane thumping more aggressively than usual. Silence reigned for a breath, then chaos broke loose. Professor Binns could do nothing to stop it.

Brie smiled to himself as he relaxed in the Library. It was quite nice not to have to hurry off to History after lunch on Wednesdays like today. Quitting Binns's class two weeks ago had been the best idea he'd had in a long time.

He'd finally been able to spend time working on the translation of that book Professor Snape had given him. It was slow going, but he was almost done. The hard part was in knowing what to translate – the Parsel magic was useless to anyone who wasn't a Parselmouth, and made no sense in English anyways, but also made up at least a third of the book's content.

He'd accidentally skipped Herbology today – he'd have to be careful not to make a habit of that – as he browsed the Library and tried to find some clues as to where the Chamber of Secrets might be located. Levi had told him that Salazar was one of the founders of Hogwarts, so he knew that it was somewhere in the castle – it was just a matter of figuring out where.

Levi wanted to know what he planned to do once he found it. A basilisk was nice in theory, but it was hardly practical. Especially in a school. What good would a basilisk do a mal Théa in Hogwarts? But Brie had been trained to always be prepared for anything. If there was a basilisk on the grounds, well, he'd rather know where it was and how to control it then to be surprised by it sometime down the line.

It was as he was paging through Hogwarts; a History that he heard the sniffing.

Internally cursing his genetic curiosity, he pulled out a book to peak through to the other isle. Hermione sat on the floor, arms wrapped around her legs and face buried in her knees. Her shoulders were shaking slightly, and the distinct absence of books suggested that her tears were not of the academic-frustration variety.

Brie was around the shelves and kneeling down beside the girl before he had time to think about his actions.

"Hermione?" He refrained from touching her. No need to startle her, after all. "Ça va, Hermione?"

She lifted her tear streaked face at the sound of his voice, stared at him for a minute, then tried to scrub away the evidence that she'd been crying. New tears leaked out of her eyes, making the endeavor doomed from the get-go.

"What happened?" he pressed, voice soft but firm.

She mumbled something into her knees that he couldn't catch, and he suppressed an irritated sigh. He was completely inexperienced when it came to comforting crying females. Fae didn't cry – no one would dare tease her, after all, and Shay had trained both his children out of that 'bad habit' at a young age.

In fact, none of his relatives really cried. Levi sometimes teared up in frustration, but he never cried. Bella was the only one he'd ever seen cry, and those were 'movie tugging heartstrings' tears, not 'I'm hurting make me better' tears. Hermione's tears seemed the 'I'm hurting make me better' sort.

"I couldn't understand you," he told her patiently. "You need to speak up if you expect me to do anything about it."

This seemed the wrong thing to say, as more water started leaking out of her eyes. She lifted her head up, though, which was some progress. Again, he considered reaching out and touching her, but he didn't. She wasn't family.

"I-I-I'm a-alri-ri-right," she choked out between gasping sobs, forcing the words out through her tears. He raised an expressive eyebrow and got a watery smile for his efforts. "I-I-I'll be alright," she corrected herself.

"Of course you will be," he scoffed. "That was never the question. The question is what happened." He settled cross-legged in front of her and set up a discreet privacy charm. The last thing he needed was to have someone catch him being a softie. He'd never live it down.

It took a few minutes for her to collect herself enough to say anything at all. He obligingly conjured her a glass of water and a wet rag for her face. She gave him another watery smile and began taking deep, steady breaths.

"It was at the end of Arithmancy," she said after she'd gotten a hold of herself. "The Slytherins cornered me, and, and, they were teasing me. I'm sorry, it's really ridiculous," she moaned, face red and blotchy from a combination of tears and embarrassment.

"No it isn't," he frowned. "They were teasing you, and..."

"Oh, the usual. They didn't touch me, of course, but there was plenty of male leering involved. They said," her voice dropped, "they called me a filthy mudblood slut. They said I would never amount to anything, except maybe, if I was very lucky, 'the Weasel' would keep me as a fuck toy. Not a wife. Because mudbloods aren't good enough. Only... Only a fuck toy," she spat, tears welling up again.

Brie was fuming inside. How dare they treat her like that? Had they forgotten she was under his protection so quickly? Or were they trusting that she wouldn't say anything to anyone? And if that were the case, was this the first time they'd done it?

"Who was it?" he asked softly, kindly.

"Oh, the usual suspects," she sniffled. "Malfoy and his brutes, Parkinson, Bulstrode..."

"Have they done this before?" he inquired lightly, trying to keep the anger out of his voice. She shrugged, and he took it as a yes. His eyes narrowed dangerously. Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, Parkinson, and Bulstrode. They were going to regret ever messing with him.

"Did they say anything else?" Not that there could be anything much worse than what she'd already told him, but it would probably do her good to get it off her chest. It would also serve him as weapons against them.

"Not really," she looked away shamefully.

"What did they say?" he pressed, reading another story that hadn't been told.

"They said that I'm ugly – which I already knew. I mean, I look in the mirror every day, right? – and that I'm an annoying know-it-all, but that if I put my mouth to better use," she snarled, "I might be decent. Not that they would ever touch me, of course."

"You're not ugly," he responded automatically. He might not be used to crying girls, but he was familiar with girls. "And intelligence is not a bad character trait to have. My wife is extremely intelligent, and I'm proud of her for it. No one should dumb themselves down for any reason."

Hermione gave a half-hearted chuckle. "That's what my daddy always told me. Not to dumb myself down for boys."

"Smart man," Brie said approvingly. "Listen to his advice. You're lucky to have a father to give it to you. Don't waste it."

Hermione bit her lip and drew a deep breath. Brie stilled – he knew what was coming next.

"You... You don't have a father," she whispered tentatively.

"No," he said, softly but matter-of-factly.

"Did he... die?"

"Yes. Both my biological parents died when I was an infant." Audric sent him copies of all the letters he and Hermione exchanged – he'd found the letters gave him wonderful insight into the girl's character, and he found himself drawn to her. She was like Sky that way.

"Oh. I'm sorry. Um, Mr. Sinclair said that you knew –"

"Yes. We've gotten off topic, though, Miss Granger. I believe we were talking about you." He said it a bit more sharply than he intended. His childhood just wasn't something he enjoyed talking about.

"Oh," she murmured, looking down at her knees.

"Hermione, would you do me the honor of attending the Yule Ball with me?" he asked on a whim.

She turned her head and gaped at him for a moment, and he regarded her curiously. He hadn't meant to ask her. In fact, he hadn't meant to ask anyone at all. If he couldn't go with Fae, he wouldn't go with anyone. But he'd gotten a feeling that it was the right thing to do, and he'd asked before he'd thought it through.

"I... I..."

He smiled at her, and her eyes widened. Oh yeah, he thought, I don't usually smile around here.

"Ok," she said dazedly.

His smile widened, and he bowed slightly from his sitting position. "Thank you, mademoiselle. It will be a pleasure to have such a fair dancing partner."

"I don't really know how to dance," she bit her lip, looking at her knees again. "I mean, I can do the basic waltz – everyone can – but I usually sit out during the Ball."

"Easily rectified," he waved his hand airily. Standing in a smooth motion, hiding his wince as his legs complained, he extended a

hand to her. Startled, she grasped it and let herself be pulled to her feet.

"My favorite dance," he informed her, "is the tango. Stand straight, hold your head just so," he demonstrated. "Now put your hand on my upper arm, that's it." He reached around and placed his hand on her shoulder blades, resting it there lightly while she got used to the intimate position. He grasped her left hand in his right, brought it up into position and looked down at her.

Her eyes were still red from crying, but he was pleased to note that she seemed to have forgotten what had brought her to the far corner of the Library. She seemed slightly uncomfortable with the position, but not overly so. Once he got her dancing, she'd probably relax a bit.

"Now, you're going to have to let me lead," he told her sternly. "Just follow me, and you'll be fine."

She nodded, licking her lips nervously. "Alright."

"You'll step backward, no, other foot. Slow, slow, quick-quick, slow," he walked her through the first set of steps. "And again – one two tan-go step, one two tan-go step, one two tan-go step."

He steered her down the book aisle as she counted with him, nervously glancing down at their feet. He stopped them when they reached the end of the first row.

"A few things right off. You're too limp in my arms. Step back, that's right. You feel my hand pressing against your shoulders? That's how I lead you. Don't push, but there ought to be pressure where you touch my shoulder and I touch your back. I'm not going to drop you," he added wryly.

"Like this?"

"Yes. And keep your chin up. Posture is extremely important in this dance. Alright? Let's try again. One two tan-go step," he began, counting her down the aisle. She got the hang of it quickly, and he led her out to a slightly more open section of the Library. It was still out of the way, where they were unlikely to be bothered, but with enough room that he could teach her some other basic moves.

They got to the lady's promenade, and he smiled at her as he explained it. "This is the easy part," he told her, "where I make you look beautiful." She turned a gratifying shade of pink, performing the move splendidly.

They danced for another ten minutes before he stepped out of the frame. He bowed over her hand, causing her to grin in delight. There were no longer any traces that she had been crying, and in fact she rather glowed with happiness. Remembering his own first dancing lessons, he couldn't help but smile back at her.

"Thank you, mademoiselle. I would love to dance the night away in your arms, but it is nearly time for dinner. May I escort you to the Hall?"

"Yes, thank you." She beamed up at him, taking his offered elbow with unpracticed charm. He surreptitiously adjusted her hand, and she flashed him another smile, this time as though they were sharing a secret.

"Thank you for this afternoon," she said as they walked toward the Great Hall. "That was really fun. I needed that, and I really appreciate you being there for me."

"It was my pleasure, Hermione," he informed her gravely, cane tapping the stones as they walked. "Let me know if you want to practice again before the Ball."

"I will. You're a real friend, Gabriel mal Théa, whether you want to admit it or not."

"My name is Brie," he chastised lightly as he opened the door for her.

"Thanks, Brie," she smiled.

Chapter Twenty One: Periwinkle

The dungeon hall was cooler than the main part of the castle, and it combined with the pervasive dampness to make Brie very glad that he hadn't been sorted into Slytherin. Already it was setting his legs aching, and he'd only been walking for a short time. Levi had told him that the Slytherin common room was a little ways past the Potions classroom, but he hadn't known its exact location. So here was Brie, wandering through the halls and trying to find the hidden dorms of the snakes.

Not that he had anything against snakes, of course. He actually quite liked most of them, though they weren't the best conversationalists. It amused him that the Slytherins had embraced the creatures as their emblem.

"Roaming the dungeons again, little warrior?"

"Baron," Brie turned to greet the ghost, easily hiding his surprise. "Good evening. I trust you are well," he added ironically.

"Quite," agreed the Baron, amusement coloring his voice ever so slightly.

"Have you seen a little dragon around?" Brie inquired easily. If he kept searching the halls himself, he'd be at it all night. The Baron would definitely know where the entrance to the Slytherin dorm was – the trick was getting the ghost to lead him there.

"Not lately."

"Do you know where I might find him?" Brie tried again, correcting his wording to invite a more helpful reply. The Baron smirked slightly in approval.

"Likely the dorms. Most children are in their dorms at this time," he invited Brie to satisfy his own curiosity, and Brie obliged.

"I find my Housemates a bit uncouth for my tastes," Brie confided.

It was the right answer, because the Baron began drifting purposefully down the hall, back the way he'd come. Brie followed, mentally grinning in triumph. They reached a blank stone wall, and the Baron promptly sailed through it. After a moment's surprise, Brie registered that it must be the entrance to the dorms. The Baron had left him without a way to get in – without the password he would be reduced to knocking on the wall and hoping someone would open up or, worse, waiting for a Slytherin who was out past curfew.

Or, at least that would be the case if Brie was a normal child.

He reached out and placed his hand on the wall. When he was younger, his magic had done this for him automatically, but as he learned control over his magic, he'd had to learn to do this consciously. He felt for the spell that kept the door password protected. It was the most obvious of the spells, as it was used every time a child walked in or out. All it took was a breath of magic to convince the spell that he'd said the proper password, and the door swung open without protest.

The Slytherins nearest the doorway glanced up as he entered and gaped slightly when they saw who it was. Obviously it was unusual for Gryffindors to enter their common room. Floating up in a corner, the Baron was looking extremely impressed, and seemed all set to sit back and watch the show.

"Gabriel," Blaise stood up from his chair in the far corner, calmly making his way through the room toward Brie. "What a... pleasant surprise."

"I'm looking for a very small dragon," Brie announced, letting his quiet voice fill the room. It was a useful skill to have, the ability to seem to speak softly yet be heard from anywhere in a room. It was one of the first things Shay had taught him as a child.

Blaise raised his eyebrows at the epithet. When playing Politics, every word meant something. Combining a pet name with the adjectives 'very' and 'small' did not bode well for the person in question.

"He's getting ready for bed." Blaise made no move to go fetch the boy, though he also didn't try and stand in Brie's way. A true Neutral. Brie gave him an ironic nod, then made eye contact with the Bloody

Baron. After a brief battle of wills, the ghost floated through the wall to collect Draco Malfoy.

After all, this confrontation would likely prove to be the best entertainment this century.

The Slytherins were incredibly quiet the next day. In fact, most of them were downright meek. No one dared comment on it for fear of breaking the spell, but everyone noticed. Even the teachers took note of it. Malfoy and his gang were notably absent.

By dinner time, curiosity was getting the better of everyone. The topic of choice over dinner was what spell had been cast on the Slytherins, who had done it, and how long it would last. Within twenty minutes there were five preferred theories, and three of them included at least one of the Transfer students.

"So what do you think got into the snakes?" Neville prodded, looking Brie in the eye. The French boy had been suspiciously silent on the subject, and Hermione had the feeling that he'd had something to do with it. After all, there was no such thing as pure coincidence, as far as she was concerned.

Brie gave the impression of a shrug without actually moving his shoulders. Hermione still couldn't figure out how he did it, but she was dying to learn.

"What I want to know is where Malfoy's gang is. Probably up to no good," grumbled Ron, craning his head to try and spot the missing Slytherins.

"I heard that the Bloody Baron was seen laughing in the dungeons today," Ginny said, leaning forward conspiratorially. "Can you imagine? I wonder if that has anything to do with what's eating the snakes."

"But why would he be laughing at his own House? Why would he be laughing at all?" Hermione bit her lip.

"Maybe something happened in their common room last night," Neville hazarded a guess.

"Like what?" pressed Dean.

"How should I know?"

"Maybe someone pranked them," grinned Seamus. "Or maybe something exploded down there!" The group gave a collective groan. "What? What's wrong with explosions?"

They continued to toss out theories, laughing at some of the more ludicrous ones they came up with. Brie continued to listen in silence, though Hermione got the impression that he knew a lot more than he let on. How very frustrating.

"I can't believe it's finally December!" crowed Ginny gleefully as she tossed herself on the couch. "The Ball is this month!"

"Who are you going with?" Hermione inquired curiously. Ginny shrugged.

"I've had a few guys ask me so far, but no one that interests me. How about you, Neville?" she quirked an eyebrow at her friend. He blushed slightly.

"I, uh, haven't asked anyone yet."

"Well you should get your butt in gear," Ginny informed him dryly. "You have one more week to get a date before you'll have to resort to asking a third year."

"And Hermione? What about you?" Neville quickly diverted the subject away from himself.

"Oh, I'm going with Gabriel," she shrugged. Her friends gaped.

"When did this happen? Hermione..."

"It's not like that Ginny, stop giving me that look. We're going as friends. He's married, remember?"

"Why didn't you tell us?" Neville was frowning.

"Yeah! Really, Hermione. You should have told us the minute you got asked!"

"Hermione got asked what?" Ron had just entered the room and was looking at the bushy haired bookworm with an odd expression on his face.

"She got asked to the Ball, doofus," his sister rolled her eyes. "She's going with Gabriel, the lucky girl. He has to be the most gorgeous guy at school right now! Geez Hermione, I know the Slytherins tease you and everything, but first Krum and now mal Théa! How do you do it? Seriously, you need to tell me."

"Ginny," Hermione hissed, carefully looking everywhere but at Ron.

"Oh, come on, Hermione! You get all the good dates. I'm your best friend, you can tell me. It's not like –"

"Ginny," Neville interrupted, meeting her eyes then pointedly looking at her brother. Her mouth snapped shut.

Ron was pale except for his glowing red ears. His adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed convulsively, tried to speak, then swallowed again. Without a word, he turned and slipped away. The three friends were silent as Ginny reached out to pick up the little bouquet of flowers her brother had dropped.

(Conversation in various Languages)

"What kind of music do they play?" asked Brie as he sat next to his cousin in the Library. Anya was conveniently in class, leaving the boys free to discuss the Ball without dealing with any female sensibilities.

"At the Ball? I don't know. I've never gone before, Brie. Third Year, remember?"

"Right," Brie said, obviously of the opinion that his cousin knew more than he was saying. "What kind of music do they play?"

Levi laughed. "You know me too well, coz."

"It's the price I pay to please the missus."

"And I know you too well," said Levi, though he let the comment slide. He knew Brie liked him for his own sake. "There will be a live band."

"Oh?"

"Last year it was some obscure English band. Apparently they were quite good."

"And this year?" pressed Brie.

"It's supposed to be a surprise."

"And this year," Brie repeated, raising an eyebrow at Levi.

"The SHE. Irish group with a very eclectic repertoire. From what I've heard, you can expect something of everything. If someone somewhere dances to it, it'll make an appearance."

"Good boy. You convinced Uncle Claude?"

"Of what?" Levi blinked at the sudden change of conversation, obviously trying to look as though he couldn't follow his cousin's leaps of logic. "Oh, fine. Don't look at me like that. He's thinking about it. He wants me to have her over during break."

"Good luck," said Brie sincerely. "She would make a good addition to the family."

"She's not French."

"You noticed?"

"Sarcasm doesn't suit you."

"Hmm."

"It doesn't," Levi insisted. He grinned. "You look much more like the point and grunt type, actually."

"Excuse me!" Brie assumed an expression of affront, winning a chuckle from Levi.

"Of course."

"What?"

"You're excused."

"Be nice, or I'll tell Anya about The Dress."

"You wouldn't," Levi's face suddenly went still. "Gabriel Reuben-Amrit, don't you dare. Brie... Brie!"

Ron stood out on the balcony, arms crossed over his chest as he leaned over the railing. How could they do this to him? Everyone knew how he felt about Hermione. It wasn't like he was exactly subtle about it. Why didn't she wait for him? He was obviously going to ask her – he just didn't want to come off as desperate and stalkerish and ask her three months early.

After the Krum incident, though, he ought to have known better. Of course he should've swallowed his pride and asked her three months early. She was beautiful, and smart, and nice, and beautiful, and sweet, and beautiful – of course someone else would want to go with her!

He hadn't expected it from Gabriel, though. He'd thought they were friends, or at least close to something resembling friendship. They were chess buddies at least, and that ought to count for something. Maybe they weren't quite best mates, but they certainly didn't hate each other.

At least he didn't think they did.

Maybe Gabriel felt differently. Maybe he was mad at Ron for winning so many of their matches. Maybe he was trying to punish Ron for something...

Ron gave a little cry of frustration, which quickly turned into a pained whimper as he banged his fist against the stone railing. He jumped as the shadows to his left shifted.

"Who's there?"

"So what are you guys wearing to the Ball?" Lavender asked Hermione and Ginny as she and Parvati joined them on the couch.

"White," Ginny announced, smirking conspiratorially. "I worked for the Twins over the summer so that I could afford new dress robes. They're gorgeous."

"Tell us more!" Parvati leaned forward, eager to gossip about clothes.

Nearby, Brie listened with some amusement. He didn't really care much about clothes himself – if he thought he could get away with it, he would throw everything but his military outfits away – but Fae loved them. She would want to hear all about what the English girls were wearing.

"-ankles," finished Ginny happily. "How about you?"

"Oh, lavender of course," giggled Lavender. The other girls tittered obligingly. "High necked but sleeveless – they're supposed to be all the rage in Paris." She went on to describe the robes in exhausting detail, but even Hermione seemed at least somewhat interested. Girls.

"I'm wearing a sari," Parvati announced, causing Brie's ears to perk slightly. Personally he'd always been fond of saris. His mother always wore one, and he'd grown up associating the Indian garments with everything good and happy.

"What's that?" Ginny asked innocently, and Brie coughed slightly in surprise. The girls turned as one to stare at him, and he stared coolly back at them. Don't be intimidated, he thought, quirking an eyebrow at them. They're only girls. To cover any misgivings he had, he rose smoothly and walked over to join their little knot. In their surprise, they didn't try to stop him.

"A sari is an Indian garment," he informed the curious redhead. "A long piece of cloth that is wrapped around the waist as a skirt, then draped over the shoulder. Sometimes the drape is worn over the head."

"Exactly," Parvati smiled at him, toying with her plait. "And there's a little shirt worn under it with sleeves shorter than the elbow, and that doesn't cover the stomach."

"Oh," Ginny said.

"How did you know?" asked Lavender blankly. Brie raised an eyebrow and the girl blushed. "Oh, right. You're Indian."

"So... What happened to this being girl time?" Hermione mimicked his raised eyebrow.

"Sorry, I missed the memo."

Hermione cracked a smile. "You know, I can't get over how incongruous it is for you of all people to make Muggle pop-culture references. And American pop-culture at that!"

"What are you wearing to the Ball?" he inquired, ignoring her.

"I thought you weren't supposed to reveal your outfit to your date. It's bad luck."

"You're thinking of brides."

"Oh. Well, it might be bad luck anyways."

The other girls watched with bemused expressions as the two bantered. If it had been anyone else it might even have been called flirting.

"What are you wearing?" inserted Parvati.

"Oh, periwinkle," blushed Hermione. The other three girls all groaned.

"Oh no Hermione!"

"You can't!"

"Not again!"

"What's wrong with periwinkle?" Hermione snapped defensively.

"There's nothing wrong with periwinkle, sweetie," Ginny trailed off.

"It's just that you wore periwinkle last year," Lavender groaned.

"And the year before," added Parvati.

"I still don't see what's wrong with it," Hermione grumbled, face pink as she avoided Brie's curious gaze.

"Hermione. I love you. Really I do – but wearing the same dress robes for three years in a row is a little much. I'm dirt poor, and I've worn something different every year!"

Brie's eyebrows shot up at the pronouncement, and he gave Hermione a faintly disapproving look. The same robes? That was bad. Periwinkle over and over again was bad enough. Periwinkle for the first time was already pretty bad in his opinion. His mind began mulling over possible solutions to his sudden problem.

"Well, I feel really bad making my parents buy me new robes every year when these ones fit just fine," Hermione mumbled. "There's nothing wrong with them, and dress robes are expensive! Especially to only wear once."

The girls remained silent, giving Hermione matching looks of horrified despair.

"You just failed Girl 101," Lavender announced.

"Miserably," Parvati gave her a pitying look. Ginny nodded sympathetic agreement. Hermione just groaned.

"Who's there?" a soft female voice called from the shadows.

"Uh, Ron. It's Ron," he shifted nervously, clearing his throat.

He'd been getting better around girls lately, especially since he'd given his heart to Hermione – as far as he was concerned, she was the only female that he needed to worry about impressing. He was still a teenage boy, though, and there was something inherently nerve wracking about talking to a mystery woman on a castle balcony at night.

"Weasley?"

"Yeah. Uh, not to be rude..." the girl stepped forward and the light from inside the castle lit up her golden brown hair. "Rousseau!"

"Oui."

"What are you doing out here?" he stumbled over his words slightly, trying not to stare down her low cut casual robes.

"Fresh air," she replied, shrugging, making the movement elegant and beautiful. "You?"

"Sulking," he admitted before he could think better of it. His ears burned as he tore his eyes away from the beautiful girl.

"Pourquoi?"

"What?"

"Pou – why?" she corrected herself, voice honey rich and deliciously wonderful to listen to.

"Sulking? Oh. Because mal Théa is taking my girl to the Ball," his arms crossed tighter across his chest, and he resisted the urge to look over at Rousseau.

"Is he? How horrible of him," she nearly purred. He was aware of her warmth at his side, and he shifted nervously. Should he scoot over? Or move towards her? His brain scrambled for an answer while he stood stiffly looking over the lake.

"Are you angry at him?"

"Yes," he replied immediately. "Everyone knows Hermione's my girl! I thought we were friends!"

"Gabriel mal Théa has no friends," her voice was sympathetic, but factual. "He does not know the meaning of the word."

Ron shrugged helplessly.

"So what will you do about it?" she inquired lightly, and Ron looked over at her in surprise. He immediately wished he hadn't as he jerked his eyes away again, blushing profusely. I'm loyal to Hermione, he repeated in his mind. Loyal, loyal, loyal.

"Do?" he squeaked.

"Yes," she laughed softly, sending shivers up his spine. "He took your girl. What will you do? Think about it, sweetie."

And with that, he was alone on the balcony once more.

"So what are you going to do about dress robes?" Ginny asked as they walked to breakfast the next morning. Neville and Brie wisely walked a few paces behind, keeping out of the 'girl talk.'

"What do you mean?" Hermione pursed her lips, throwing a discouraging glance toward her redheaded best friend.

"Well... you're not actually planning to wear your old set, are you?"

Hermione's silence spoke volumes.

"Ah, come on!"

"I don't have anything else! No other dress robes, at least."

"What do you mean?" Ginny asked curiously. Hermione shrugged.

"I've got dresses, but they aren't robes. They're Muggle, and they're at home anyways."

"Send for them," Brie told her firmly from behind. She turned to walk backwards a few paces, trying to make eye contact and figure out what he was thinking. It was an impossible task, and she gave it up when she almost fell down the stairs.

"They're Muggle," she repeated, in case he had missed it the first time. "Really, really Muggle."

"Anya will be wearing Russian robes," he pointed out. "Melisande will wear French fashion. Miss Patil will wear Indian garb."

"Oh," she said thoughtfully.

Ron watched Gabriel sit with Hermione during breakfast. He watched the handsome French student bend slightly to share a quiet conversation with her. He watched the exotic young man make her laugh. He watched the quiet soldier carry her books to their next class.

He watched and he stewed.

Once he caught Rousseau watching him from the Slytherin Table, and she gave him an amused look. He was tempted to try and talk to her, but she was surrounded by other students and he doubted he'd be able to get close enough to talk. Instead he headed toward Charms, mulling over what she'd said last night.

She had said that Gabriel didn't know the meaning of the word 'friend,' but it seemed to Ron that he did. He was definitely friends with those two Ravenclaws, after all. Besides, no matter how beautiful the Slytherin was, she was still a Slytherin – they didn't believe in handing out good advice for free.

So what would she get out of Ron believing that Gabriel couldn't have friends?

Well, it wasn't exactly uncommon knowledge that Ron was rash. He often did things without thinking them through. Maybe she wanted to hurt Gabriel somehow? But that didn't seem to fit. It seemed that the two French exchange students got on well enough, though they weren't exactly bosom buddies.

Maybe she was jealous too? Maybe she'd thought Gabriel would take her to the dance, and she wanted to get back at him through another channel. That didn't seem to fit either – the transfers weren't allowed to take other transfers.

What could she possibly gain from spurring Ron on? It would be so much easier to determine what she wanted if she had urged him toward a particular course of action, rather than any course of action.

"He took your girl. What will you do? Think about it."

He took Ron's girl.

What should he do about it?

Ron's girl.

And then Ron knew exactly what he ought to do about it. Grinning to himself he ran to beat the bell to Charms.

Hermione flipped through the morning paper as she sat through History. After Brie's little outburst last month, she had compared her notes to the book. Unsurprisingly, she found that the boy was right – Professor Binns was mixing up his information. She'd read somewhere that memory loss was one of the side effects of death, though the book hadn't said anything about ghosts' memories.

The Daily Prophet was, once again, filled with suspicious deaths and missing persons reports. The Dark Mark had been spotted over another raided home, and even the Ministry was starting to admit that You-Know-Who just might be back. It had been fifteen years since his downfall, after all, and even if it wasn't a magic number, fifteen had a nice round feeling to it.

Hermione flipped to the next page and read about the death of Mrs. Agatha Slorter, squib daughter of the well-known Jones family. She, her Muggle husband, and their three non-magical children had all been slaughtered that night. The Dark Mark was seen floating over their house, which was what had alerted the Ministry to what would have otherwise been considered a purely Muggle affaire.

On the opposite page there were two paragraphs describing another Dark Mark sighting. This one detailed the deaths of the Kleins, the Muggle family of a Third Year Hufflepuff. Another three paragraphs described the deaths of two Hogwarts alumni, both Muggleborns who had been happily living together in Muggle London.

Hermione was beginning to worry about her own family. She wasn't exactly a prime political target, of course – but neither were the Kleins or the Slorters. In fact, in some ways she was a rather good target. She was smart – she often showed up the rich Slytherin blood purists – and she could be a bit of a political radical when the mood took her – SPEW, for example.

She set aside the newspaper with an unhappy sigh. Maybe if she talked to Professor McGonagall, some sort of arrangement could be made. She was considering trying to set up a ward over winter break, but the Ministry probably wouldn't be too thrilled with her taking things into her own (underage) hands.

As the bell rang signaling the end of class, Hermione stuffed the paper into her bag. She would talk to McGonagall, and if her Head of House didn't have any advice, well she had other venues to turn to. The Headmaster, for one. He'd always been very kind to her, and she was pretty sure that he would at least listen carefully to her problem.

And if all else failed, well, she was friends with two reasonably powerful Traditionalists. Playing Politics included playing for favors – and favors she could handle. She would leave it as a last resort, but a resort nonetheless. Her family was important to her, after all.

Finding the Chamber of Secrets was not proving to be an easy task. So far the only thing that Brie had really managed to discover was that Salazar had indeed left a secret room in Hogwarts and that it had something to do with pipes. How that was helpful, he wasn't quite sure, but he'd eventually work it out.

Levi wasn't being overly helpful, either. For one thing, he wasn't completely convinced that finding the Chamber would be a good thing – he seemed to think that waking up a one thousand year old basilisk for no reason was, in fact, a very bad thing. Brie failed to grasp his misgivings.

End of term was approaching, and as far as Brie was concerned it was long past time to have found the Chamber. He'd already finished translating Salazar's book and had sent a full copy to his uncle for consideration. Shay could deal with getting a censored copy back to Snape. In the meantime, Brie really wanted to find the stupid Chamber.

He was getting to the point where he was ready to ask for outside help.

Chapter Twenty Two: Tis the Season

As December wore on, the upcoming Yule Ball became all anyone could talk about. Anyone who didn't have a date was scrambling around, and the third years were looking hopeful as their prettiest year mates began receiving invitations. The Hogsmead weekend before the Ball, the shops were packed with students getting last minute alterations and accessories. Everyone was focusing on the approaching holiday with glee.

No one wanted to be reminded of the now daily articles. No one wanted to think about Death Eater activity with Christmas right around the corner. Nobody wanted to read the growing list of casualties over breakfast.

So they didn't.

The students buried themselves in the preparations for the Yule Ball, and when that failed, they buried themselves in schoolwork. The teachers were distracted by the sudden increase in thoughtful essays, and when that failed to keep them busy, they threw themselves into preparations for the Yule Ball. Hogwarts was bustling and full of life which, as far as Albus Dumbledore was concerned, was exactly as it should be.

The week of the Ball was ushered in by the worst snowstorm Hogwarts had seen in a decade.

On Saturday snow began piling up around the castle, completely burying the greenhouses. The windows iced over and cold drafts leaked through the stones in spite of numerous charms. For two days, the students of Hogwarts struggled to stay warm. The younger children quickly found older students who were willing to cast warming charms, and otherwise kept their thick winter cloaks close at hand.

In a strange about face, the Towers were subjected to frigid winds and freezing temperatures while the snow kept the dungeons insulated and cozy. In Gryffindor Tower, Hermione Granger took it upon herself to teach every single member of her House how to cast warming spells and wards against the cold. It took several hours, but the returned warmth of the common room was well worth it to

everyone. Afterwards, she threw herself into personally applying all of the charms to all of the dorms.

"He'll be alright," Ron said from the doorway of the second year boys' dorm. Hermione squeaked and whirled around, hand clutching her heart.

"Don't scare me like that!" she scolded breathlessly. "Can't you make some noise when you're creeping up on girls?"

"I wasn't creeping," Ron protested absently, watching as she calmed down.

"And I don't know what you're talking about," Hermione added, flustered.

"Really?" he gave her a self-deprecating smile. "I would have thought you knew what creeping meant. Aren't you a walking dictionary?"

"Ron—"

"Look, we all know you're worried sick. He'll be fine. You'll still have a date to the Ball," he added bitterly. Hermione's face crumpled.

"Ron—"

"Don't say it," he instructed her firmly. "Just stop agonizing over Mr. Rich and Infamous. I'm sure he was smart enough to find shelter from the storm." Without another word, he turned and walked away. Hermione watched him go, chewing on her lip.

"Thank you," she said into the empty room.

The snow stopped sometime during the night, and Monday morning dawned bright and clear. It was still well below freezing, but somehow the presence of the sun made it bearable for the castle's inhabitants. The glistening snow was picturesque, and several students were discussing the possibility of the lake being frozen enough to skate on. Not everyone was so carefree, however.

Hermione's anxiety was spilling over into her friends as breakfast came and went with no sign of Gabriel. Despite Neville's

knowledgeable assertions, Ginny's comforting words, and Ron's sour reassurances, Hermione couldn't help but worry about her friend. Normally he came back Sunday afternoon or evening at the latest. He rarely missed Sunday dinner, yet here it was Monday morning and he still hadn't shown his face.

This just went to show that letting students leave the castle was a very bad idea. And what was he thinking, anyways? The temperatures had been falling since Wednesday, it had been getting icy, and the Daily Prophet had forecasted a balmy tropical weekend – he should have known it would be a blizzard! How dare he make her worry like this.

Of course, that was another thing that bothered her. Why was she worrying? She knew quite well that he was able to take care of himself. If rumors were true, and he really was the Archangel... Well, she'd read all sorts of stories about him, and she knew a little blizzard probably wouldn't even make a dent in his training schedule.

At least, not as far as the stories and reports went. That wasn't to say they weren't gross exaggerations, and there was the heart of Hermione's concern. How much of those stories was tall tale and how much could she take seriously? Until her friend came back safe and sound, she couldn't assume anything.

Damn the boy for making her worry.

Charms passed, and Brie remained glaringly absent. When Professor Flitwick inquired after him, his Housemates shrugged and kept quiet about his disappearance. After all, the Headmaster knew as much about Brie's weekend plans as they did, so there was no use telling tales on him. At least that's how Hermione justified it to herself, when she finally acknowledged that it might need justifying.

She could hardly bear to sit through History. Professor Binns droned on, and Hermione found herself gazing out the window at the pristine snow that spread across Hogwarts' grounds. Nothing broke up the sparkling white expanse except for a single dark shape that moved purposefully toward the gate. Hermione squinted, trying to make out the shape until a flash of silver caught her eye. Of course. Gabriel.

Without a word to Binns, she stood and slipped out of the room. She doubted he would even notice she was gone. Behind her, Neville scrambled to his feet and hurried after her, making a bit more noise. She waited, giving him a moment to catch up, then took off toward the front entrance.

She needed a word with that boy.

Predictably, Brie didn't show any sign of surprise at their presence. In fact, he looked amused, and that only served to make Hermione boil inside. At least she was warm.

"Where have you been?" she demanded, hands on her hips and her voice borderline shrill. A few steps behind her, Neville shifted nervously from foot to foot, not wanting to get caught up in the cross fire.

Brie arched an elegant eyebrow, silently asking why he should feel the need to explain himself to her.

"I've been worried sick," she snapped.

"Why?" there was a trace of honest surprise in his voice, and Hermione felt her temper rise a few notches.

"Why? Why? I'm your friend you arrogant peacock! In case you didn't notice, there was sort of a blizzard, and as far as anyone knew you were out in the worst of it!"

"Not at all," he shook his head. "I was deep in the forest – the worst of a blizzard is out in the open, away from shelter."

Hermione growled and glared at him, balling her fists at her sides. She wanted to hit him, like she would any of the other Gryffindor boys who made her worry like that. She wanted to take him to task, but so far that wasn't working out so well – for one thing, he was completely not intimidated by her, which was a problem.

She settled for throwing a snow ball at his face.

He ducked away, of course, but his look of consternation was worth it. She threw another one at him, and this one hit him square in the

chest. He looked down at the icy splatter on the front of his coat, then looked at her with raised eyebrows.

"Don't make me worry," she began again, only to stop, spluttering as she choked on packed snow. The bloody wanker had thrown a snowball back in her face! Howling something unintelligible, she scooped up more snow. Within moments, their civilized conversation degenerated into an all out war.

Brie crouched behind a hastily erected wall of ice blocks, peering around the edge as he tried to gauge where the enemy was now.

"Squad A, you're goat duty! Squad C, levitate B behind enemy lines. Don't forget disillusionment charms!"

"Yes sir!" a gaggle of giggling children responded, falling to their tasks with sloppy glee. They would all have been killed instantly in real battle, but here the only penalty they paid for being careless was a light wallop of frozen water. Still, they were admirably enthusiastic about obeying orders from a "real general," as they said. And it was kind of fun, in a weird way. Almost relaxing. And as much as Brie enjoyed training, he would never have said any battle, simulated or not, could be relaxing.

Another chorus of laughter broke out from the other side of the field, where Hermione was directing her forces against him. He smiled to himself as he ordered his "soldiers" to move out. A ripple in the sky indicated his floating Second Years, and he watched as they snuck behind Hermione's troops. His First Years were still distracting the enemy, and Squad B managed to successfully complete their sneak attack. Brie smirked.

Who would have thought playing in the snow could be so much fun?

The day of the Ball came at last, and the entire school was buzzing with suppressed energy. After the school wide snowball fight at the beginning of the week, most students had barely been able to contain their glee. It was a relief for the day to arrive.

The Gryffindor common room was noisy as students ran around, trying to find last minute accessories and advice from their fellow

students. The bathrooms were even worse, as everyone wanted showers and a turn at the mirrors.

Brie sat back and watched the fuss with amusement. He had taken his shower early, and he had his own mirror that was plenty big enough to sit at and style his hair. He was able to enjoy watching the other, normally hygienically-neglectful, boys scramble about.

"Oi, Ron! Move, you great lump! You've been in front of that mirror for twenty minutes!"

"Your hair isn't getting any nicer, mate. Give it up and let me have the mirror!"

"No, it's my turn!"

"Hey Nev, you got any extra pins?"

"Sure, catch."

"Get dressed, Seamus! Bloody hell, mate..."

"Anyone see my brush?"

"You have a brush?"

"Could've fooled me."

"Shut up!"

And on it went. Slowly but surely, the four Sixth Years pieced together their outfits and styled their hair. Seamus wore dark green robes with darker green under layers. Dean was wearing simple black and white robes in a style vaguely reminiscent of a Muggle tuxedo; a current fad among the younger generation. Neville was dressed more traditionally in the Longbottom brown and gold, looking every inch the pureblood heir that he was. Ron, like his sister, had saved up enough money doing odd jobs during the summer that he had managed to buy new dress robes for the ball. He wore charcoal grey over cream in a slightly outmoded style that he barely managed to pull off.

Brie lounged on his bed, watching the final scramble with amused disdain. He himself had finished getting ready nearly half an hour earlier than his dorm mates.

Fae's touch was obvious in his wardrobe for the evening. His pants were black, and the loose silk was tucked in to his short suede boots. He wore a black long sleeved turtleneck that clung to him like a second skin, leaving nothing to the imagination. A bold blue-green sash was tied around his waist, his wand squirreled away at the small of his back.

Over this, he wore a sleeveless open robe that fell to his ankles in waves of gleaming silk. The robe was a mixture of dark peacock blues and greens that matched the sash, with bold gold runic designs picked out along the hems. His outfit was completed with a sapphire and gold brooch fastened at his neck, and a matching one holding back his hair.

"You look really nice," Neville smiled at him as they waited for the other boys to finish up at the mirror.

Brie nodded acknowledgement of the compliment. He momentarily toyed with the idea of returning it – Neville did, after all, look quite nice himself – but quickly dismissed the notion. It would only make the other boy nervous.

"I gotta run," Seamus waved, heading for the door. "I'm meeting Cindy ten minutes ago!"

"Have fun," Dean called after him, grinning.

"So who's your date, Dean?" Ron asked for the umpteenth time. Dean shrugged, looking entirely too smug.

"Come on, Dean! You gotta tell us," Neville pressed, smiling over at the black boy as he fiddled nervously with the high collar of his robes. "We'll be finding out soon anyways."

"Exactly," Dean agreed with a laugh. "So why spoil my fun? Besides, I'm not the only one who won't fess up about the identity of my Yule date," he looked pointedly at Ron.

"None of your business," the redhead mumbled, blushing.

"What happened to 'Hermione is the only girl for me'?" Dean teased.

"As much as I'm enjoying this," Brie inserted smoothly, picking up his gold dress cane as he slipped off his bed. "I'm ready to go. Come." He turned and walked out the door, leaving three slightly stunned teenagers behind him.

"That guy is the most arrogant,"

"Self absorbed,"

"Peacock."

Laughing, they followed him out of the dorm.

"Has anyone seen my sash?" called Lavender, spinning around in the middle of the dorm. "Merlin's beard! I had it five minutes ago!"

"Did you look on your bed?" asked Parvati as she pawed through her jewelry box.

"Duh! That was the first place I looked. Bloody hell. I can't go out in public without the sash to my robes! I'll be a laughing stock!"

"Well you should've thought of that before you lost it, Lav."

"Is it long, purple, and embroidered with flowers?" Hermione inquired from her position by the mirror.

"Thank you!" Lavender cried in relief, snatching the offered cloth. "Where did you find it?"

"It was on the floor between our beds."

"...Oh. Thanks." Lavender had the grace to look embarrassed.

"You... You look... Pretty, Hermione," commented Parvati hesitantly as she fumbled the catch of her necklace. Lavender hurried over to fasten it for her.

"Yeah," Lavender added, obviously trying hard to sound complimentary. "Great color. Muggles really are ingenious when it comes to outfits. I like the fluffy fabric."

"I dunno, looks a little course to me," admitted Parvati. "Like someone made a dress out of towels."

"And there aren't enough layers, really," said Lavender. "I mean, not to belittle your culture!"

"Of course not!" Parvati hurried to add. "No belittling of culture, Hermione! It's just..."

"Well..." Lavender trailed off, grimacing.

"It's a bathrobe, guys," said Hermione, raising an eyebrow at their antics.

"What?"

"I'm not wearing it out in public," she elaborated, turning back to the mirror.

"Oh!"

"Oh! That's good. Right Parvati?"

"Definitely."

"But... What are you wearing?"

Hermione bit her lip and shrugged a little as she pulled her blue terrycloth bathrobe tighter around herself. Her mother had been surprised by her request for her nice dresses, but she'd certainly stepped up to the plate. She'd sent everything from Hermione's party sundress to her opera evening gown, which presented something of a dilemma for the sixteen year old. She'd never had to worry about picking out a formal outfit before – her mother had always told her what the occasion was, how formal it would be, and which dress would be most appropriate.

This time she was on her own. Oh, Lavender and Parvati would probably love to see her very Muggle dresses, but they wouldn't be

any help. They didn't even recognize the bathrobe for what it was. They knew their Wizarding robes, sure, but Muggle clothes were a whole other can of worms.

"I'm not sure," she confessed. "Brie told me to dress Muggle – but I'm still not sure whether he knows what that means. I don't know what that means! Am I dressing for comfort, shock, or fashion? I don't even know what current fashion is!"

The other girls exchanged a meaningful look.

"I think it's time for those remedial lessons in Girl 101," Lavender announced, eyes glinting.

"I'm not sure we have time for remedial lessons," argued Parvati. "Better make it a cram session."

"Good point – we only have a tiny bit before the Ball starts."

"We have over two hours!" Hermione protested, not entirely certain she liked the implication that she was that much of a lost cause. Lavender and Parvati exchanged another glance. Hermione groaned. "Let's just get it over with."

"Sit," instructed Parvati. Hermione flopped onto her bed.

"Not like that!" Lavender squawked, darting forward to correct her posture. "Knees together, back straight, head up, hands in lap..."

"First off," Parvati began, pacing as she spoke, "colors. Pastels are in. Whites and creams are okay, but they're passé – don't tell that to poor Ginny, though. A bold sash is acceptable, but other than that it's strictly pastels."

"Layers," Lavender continued. "At least two, plus a coat or a cloak. More indicates more wealth or power, because getting a good design with four or more layers requires an extremely expensive custom tailoring job, and they're one of a kind pieces of fashion art. Trailing cloaks are good, trailing sleeves are okay, but never trail the actual robes."

"Slippers," Parvati took over. "Embroidered, preferably silk or satin. They usually only last through one or two parties, but fashion is an expensive mistress."

"Guaze. Chiffon. Loose, floaty material that looks light and graceful."

"No embroidery except on sash and slippers – if it's on both, then it better match."

"Don't mix colors. Choose one, and use different shades if you have to."

"High necks are in, especially if they're lace."

"Sleeves are a solid choice. Sleeveless is very daring, very avante garde. That's French."

"Hats are out, as are curls."

"Veils are in, and should be worn pinned into a bun or over a plait. Flowers, tiaras, or other accessories should be kept tasteful."

"Did we miss anything?"

"Um... I don't think so. Colors, fabrics, layers, shoes, sashes, embroidery, style, hair... Nope, I think we covered it."

"You got all that, Hermione?"

Hermione stared at them blankly, trying to absorb all the information they'd bombarded her with. Sashes? Layers? Slippers? Nothing she had matched anything they mentioned. Even her dress robes from Fourth Year hadn't been in keeping with what was apparently the current fashion.

"I...think maybe I'll just wear something I can dance in."

"If you say so. Now, where did I put that stupid sash?"

Hermione inspected herself in the mirror, twisting this way and that to check that everything looked okay and that her dress hadn't mysteriously been stained since she'd checked a minute before. She was extremely nervous. She just knew she was going to stick

out like a sore thumb. Everyone would point and laugh, because she was so not conforming to current fashion as dictated by her roommates.

"You are not a conformist, Hermione Granger," she told herself firmly. "You are purposefully not conforming to the constricting and misogynistic dress code imposed on the female sex to enforce modesty and display the wealth and power of family and escort."

"Who are you talking to in there?" Lavender called from the other side of the door.

"No one! No one at all!"

"Well, hurry up!"

"Coming!" She called back. "You can do it, Hermione," she added to herself under her breath. "You're a Gryffindor – you're not afraid of anything! Especially not the possible censure of your peers and the humiliation of being the laughingstock of the boarding school where you'll be living for another year and a half. Yep. Not afraid at all." She whirled and opened the door before she could think about it anymore. Better to just get it over with instead of worry, right?

Lavender and Parvati stared at her, eyes wide and mouths slightly open.

"You girls... look very nice," said Hermione tentatively to break the silence. Neither girl moved. Hermione blushed and fiddled with the hem of her skirt. "I look horrible, don't I," she moaned. "I knew I should've just worn the dress robes!"

"Is that legal?" Lavender squeaked, staring unabashedly at Hermione's exposed shoulders and chest.

"I'm not sure," Parvati replied slowly, scrutinizing Hermione's bare legs.

Hermione blushed darker, crossing her arms nervously over her chest. She should've chosen the opera dress. The opera dress would've looked more like what all the other girls were wearing. Sure she wouldn't be able to dance in it very easily, but it would've been

better than facing the looks she was already getting. Damn Brie and his talk of cultural pride.

"You're wearing something over it, right?" Lavender asked in a rare display of modesty. "I mean, you're not actually going to the Ball with completely bare shoulders!"

"And you're not showing so much leg, are you?" Parvati added, expressing concern over the knee length dress.

"It's... pretty, I guess," Lavender hastened to reassure as Hermione blushed miserably. "But it's just so...so..."

"Indecently Muggle!" finished Parvati.

Hermione's lips tightened. "Well it's Brie's fault. He can deal with it." She stalked over to her trunk and pulled out a pair of nylons. Her roommates watched in fascination as she wiggled into them. Her shoes came next, and Lavender made a small choking sound as she stared at the three inch heels. Two quick spells insured no blisters and no broken ankles, and she was ready to go.

Brie and Neville stood in the common room, waiting for the girls to come down and join them. Dean had left soon after Seamus, talking about needing to meet his special someone. Ron had slipped away sometime during the wait, without saying so much as a goodbye. So far they had been enjoying the scenery and watching their beautifully clad Housemates trip and totter as they ran through last minute errands.

Ginny came down first. Her red hair was pinned up under a white veil, and she had managed to buy three layered robes. There was lace around the neck and on her sash. Her slippers had a touch of lace where they peaked out from under the long garment. Neville wet his lips nervously, eyes following her every move.

"Gi-Ginny! You look... wow! You look fantastic!"

"Thanks, Nev," she gave him a playful smile. "You're looking pretty sharp yourself!"

"Where is your wand?" Brie inquired, scrutinizing the close fitting robes, trying to figure out where she could've possibly stashed it that wouldn't show.

Ginny shrugged. "It's just the Yule Ball," she informed him. "No one will need their wands."

Brie raised his eyebrows but didn't comment. If she wanted to be helpless in the event of an attack, well, that was her business. From the way that Neville was carefully looking away, he too was going unarmed. Hopefully not everyone was that careless. The Slytherins wouldn't be, that was certain.

"Where's Hermione?" Neville quickly changed the subject.

"I don't know," Ginny looked up the stairs back toward the girls' dorms. "She got ready in her room, and I got ready in mine. I haven't actually seen her Muggle dress yet," Ginny added, grinning. "How different from robes do you think it'll be?"

"Quite," Brie told her. He wasn't sure what type of dress the girl would wear, but if she was half the woman he hoped she was, it would be something to shock her Wizarding peers. An evening gown would probably be most appropriate, but he was really hoping for something along the lines of a cocktail dress.

"Hermione?" Ginny suddenly squeaked, staring at her best friend.

Brie looked up the stairs and had to suppress a smile. Good girl, he mentally congratulated her. She had chosen a classic little black dress that was about as non-Wizarding as one could get. It was strapless and had a sweetheart neckline that proved the bookworm had nice curves hidden away beneath her school uniform. The dress ended right below her knees, and had the flowing quality of a good dance skirt. Paired with the high black sandals, she looked even better than Brie had hoped.

"Lovely," he informed her as she walked over to join them.

"Thanks," Hermione blushed. "I wasn't sure whether you'd approve, since you're a Traditionalist and all."

"I also reference Muggle pop culture," he pointed out, and she laughed, relaxing. "Close your eyes."

Hermione's eyes snapped close and Brie stepped forward. He caught her peaking as he slipped the corsage he'd bought for her onto her wrist. She gasped and opened her eyes fully as Brie stepped back.

"Perfect," he informed her, inspecting his handiwork.

"Thank you," she mumbled, hesitantly touching the beautiful corsage of lilies and baby red roses. She looked as though she wanted to ask about it, so he decided to play it safe and not give her time for questions.

"Let's go down." He offered her his elbow, and she took it with a little smile.

"You look really nice," she told him as they walked down toward the Great Hall. "Not what I was expecting, but still really nice."

"Fae designed it for me," he informed her.

"Oh. And... Fae is your... wife, right?"

"Yes."

Hermione was silent for a moment as they walked, and Brie was mildly curious what she was thinking about. He'd brought up Fae for a reason, after all – had she received the message?

"Lav and Parvati told me about layers being fashionable," she began, steering the subject away. "About how they show wealth and prestige. All the other boys I've seen so far tonight are wearing multiple layers. I would've thought you would be too."

"I do not feel a need to flaunt my wealth in such a way."

"How do you flaunt your wealth?" she asked pertly. Brie grinned.

"My jewelry is one of a kind, made specifically for me, specifically for tonight. The cloth I wear is imported from a tiny Magical community in China that specializes in imbuing their silk with magic. One yard of

this costs around two hundred galleons. The gold embroidery is actual gold, not just dyed cloth. It is hand stitched into a runic depiction of my family tree." He paused, letting the information sink in. Hermione was looking pleasantly blank.

"I don't need layers to flaunt my wealth," he finished smugly.

The transfer students and their dates, as the guests of honor, had been asked to process in together and open the Ball with the first dance of the night. Brie was extremely tempted to bypass the ritual, but at the same time he owed it to Levi to be there with him. And, of course, it would give him the perfect opportunity to display Hermione in front of the Slytherins.

The shock value of her outfit alone made the exhibition worth it.

Brie drew Hermione into a side room where the other students were already waiting. A quick glance around showed Anya with Levi, Melisande with Blaise, and Mozarov with a young brunette he didn't recognize. After nodding to the two Slytherins, he headed over to his Ravensclaws. Hermione followed close on his heels.

"Coz," he leaned forward to kiss the thirteen year old. "(You look marvelous, Levi. Fae's?)"

"(Is it that obvious? No, stupid question. She did a great job, didn't she.)"

"(Not quite as breathtaking as that dress in-)"

"Hush!" Levi blushed slightly, frowning disapprovingly at his cousin.

"You two really ought to stick to the vernacular," Anya scolded.

"Miss Anya," Brie seized her hand and bowed gallantly over it. "Your beauty took my breath away, and I found I could no longer speak words in any language but that of love. My greatest apologies, most beautiful of ladies."

"Stop that, brute. You'll make me think you actually mean it."

"But I mean every word, lovely one!"

"That's enough, coz! Keep your flowery words for your own date. You look very nice, Miss Granger."

"Thank you. Is it mal Théa?"

"Defayne, actually. But please, call me Levi. You've met Anya, yes?"

"Yeah, we have classes together." There was a moment of awkward silence as Hermione stared at the three of them. "So. Um, Levi. That's not a name you hear every day!"

"It is short for Leverett. Do you have no nicknames?"

"Not really. I mean, the name Hermione doesn't really invite many."

"Honestly, I'm surprised my cousin hasn't started calling you something else. He's got a thing for nicknames."

"Really?" Hermione gave Brie a surprised look, obviously having trouble fitting this new tidbit of information into the current image she had of him.

"Indeed. He even tried to shorten my name," Anya added with a pained look at the unrepentant Frenchman.

"To what?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Don't encourage him," Anya told her reproachfully.

"Sorry," grinned Hermione.

The Great Hall was comfortably full of excited, chattering students dressed to the nines. Teachers drifted easily between the children, exchanging words here and there. No one was really in the mood to fight with each other, and even the Slytherins and Gryffindors seemed inclined to peacefully coexist. The only true worry for the chaperones was keeping the punch clean.

The band was almost finished setting up, and Dumbledore was giving a brief speech on peace and goodwill that no one was paying much attention to. It was almost time for the Ball to begin. Dumbledore finished with a hearty 'Happy Christmas,' and the children applauded as the violinist played the opening bars of a

waltz. The doors swung open, and the transfer students made their way to the dance floor.

Everyone watched as the eight students began to dance. The low buzz of whispers underscored the music as everyone gossiped over the Hogwarts students who had been chosen as dates and over the outlandish fashions sported by the foreign students.

And the not so foreign students. Hermione Granger's strange outfit received more stares than the stately Russian gown sported by Anya Rzaeva. The Muggleborn students hastened to explain to Pureblood friends that the dress was perfectly legitimate in their world. Those who lacked Muggleborn friends simply continued to stare in affront.

"She looks like a whore," Pansy hissed to her betrothed. "Honestly. Does she have no shame?"

"She's a mudblood," Draco sneered back. "We can hardly blame her for being an ignorant savage."

"True enough," Pansy shrugged, somewhat mollified. "But still! Showing bare leg like that? It's indecent."

"I think it's kind of cute," Tracey's Hufflepuff escort offered. "I wouldn't want my sister dressing like that, but it could be worse."

"Shut up," Tracey snapped, glancing nervously over at Draco.

"Blaise and Melisande look good together," Daphne commented idly as she drifted over.

"They make a great couple," Tracey agreed, eager to change the subject.

"Except they're not a couple," sneered Pansy. "I heard Blaise's mother is negotiating for Kirsten Sveinsdóttir."

"I'm bored," Draco announced.

"Don't worry, darling, it'll be over soon," Pansy simpered, stroking Draco's arm. He sneered, but let her.

"I want to dance. They should play dance music," Daphne said, looking out over the sea of dancers.

"So, go tell them to," Pansy waved her hand negligently. "Or better yet, have the braniac here do it," she gave Tracey's Hufflepuff a cold look.

Apparently not understanding the insult, Jaime grinned. "Sure thing! What should I ask for?"

"Something to waltz to." Tracey gave a forced smile, shooing the boy off. He went, and she sighed in relief. "It's good that O'Brien's family is politically powerful, because he sure as hell won't get anywhere on brains."

By the time he rejoined her, the rest of the Slytherins were up and dancing.

The opening dance was better than Brie had thought it would be. Hermione had blushed terribly when they'd first walked in and everyone had stared at her – that changed when they started dancing. It was a simple waltz, with little room for artistry or flair. It did give him a chance to lean down and whisper encouragement in her ear.

"Smile. Be proud. Prove that you are more than what they believe you to be."

It had the desired effect. The blush faded to a simple rosy glow of excitement. She'd given him a hesitant smile that had grown to a grin as he spun her, causing her skirt to swirl gracefully around her.

The dance ended too soon, and the waltz gave way to some pounding rock music that had many students writhing in time to the inane lyrics. Brie insisted they sit down, and soon they had gathered a small crowd of girls who wanted to get a closer look at their clothes.

"I wonder where Ron is," Hermione said as Levi handed them both glasses of punch. She'd been looking for him since they'd come in, and was having no luck.

Brie made a polite comment about letting her know if he saw the boy and won a smile for his efforts. Ginny and Neville joined them soon after, and the three couples kept each other company while they waited for a danceable song.

Finally the SHE switched to another classic waltz. At Hermione's pleading stare, Brie stood up and joined her on the dance floor. They were confined to the moves he had already taught her, as she tended to get confused when he tried to lead her through something new. It was enough to look nice, though, and enough to have fun.

Across the room, Malfoy and Parkinson were doing their best to clear the dance floor, garnering an appreciative crowd of observers. Soon Brie and Hermione were one of only five couples tenacious enough to stay on the dance floor despite the gawkers around the Slytherins. More than once Hermione seemed ready to cede the floor, but Brie refused to let her.

He shared a pointed glance with Levi, and the little Ravenclaw nodded and set off for the band. Brie didn't see whether or not he'd completed his mission, but he assumed that he had. Leaning down, he once again began whispering to Hermione.

"We are going to prove a point. Do you trust me?"

Hermione was silent a moment, then nodded firmly as they continued to dance.

Brie gave her a tiny smile. "When the next dance starts, look me in the eyes. What I will do is a variation on Imperius – but I will not be controlling you, only prompting you. Just flow."

Her nod was a little more hesitant this time, but the agreement was there. Internally Brie grinned maliciously. This was the perfect opportunity to show up Malfoy. The dance ended, and the opening beats of a swing dance began.

Spinning Hermione into the middle of the still present circle of spectators, Brie began to lead her in the energetic dance. On the other side, Malfoy and Parkinson seemed to be arguing over whether they should be competing or not. It wasn't a Malfoy-ish style of dance, but it was still ballroom, and Parkinson wasn't anxious for a mudblood to show her up on the floor.

As Brie swept Hermione up and proceeded to flip her around as though she weighed nothing at all, the Slytherins finally faded away to be observers. The Gryffindor couple had the floor to themselves. They were surrounded by the excited chatter of students who had either never seen swing dancing or had never thought to see the two of them dancing as they were.

Either way, their admiration spurred Brie to attempt bolder and more complicated moves. Hermione followed the hints of her subconscious, responding perfectly each time. They were fluid. Perfection.

By the time the dance ended, Brie was winded and his legs throbbed. Hermione was completely out of breath and glowed with exhilaration. They exited the floor to enthusiastic applause, and the band segued into more popular dance music.

"That was incredible!" Hermione gushed as she collapsed into her seat and took a big swig of her punch. "I had no idea dancing could be like that!"

"You did well," Brie responded, giving her well-earned praise. She blushed, and Brie left it at that. He wasn't much for giving out compliments in any case.

Ron fidgeted nervously by the fireplace in the Headmaster's office. He was beginning to wonder if this had been such a good idea after all. She had sounded nice enough in the letters, but a lot could be left out of a letter. For all he knew, she was a mini Parkinson or something. Or worse – a mini Lavender.

The fire popped, and Ron jerked in response. It was still orange.

He stood and paced once around the room, then sat, then stood to pace again. They were already an hour late. What was Hermione wearing? Was Hermione enjoying herself with Gabriel? Were they dancing? Did she wonder where he was?

A quiet whoosh sounded from the fire, and he spun around as a delicate shape stepped out of the green flames. She was tiny, not even as tall as his shoulder. Her skin was a dusky golden brown, and her hair was a waterfall of black curls. She was wearing a blue

outfit that Ron had no name for, though he'd seen Parvati wear something similar – though Parvati's wasn't decorated with thousands of tiny blue and green gems. Her throat and wrists were encased by glistening diamonds, and Ron couldn't help thinking that just one of those bracelets would feed his entire family for months.

She wasn't at all what he'd been expecting. Intellectually he'd known she was young, but it was somehow different to be face to face with a little slip of a kid. So young, yet already married to a boy Ron's age... It was definitely unsettling.

And then there was the fact that she looked like she could be Gabriel's sister. Ron had been expecting a pretty little blonde like Rousseau, not a young, female version of his quasi-friend. For the first time he wondered about the origin of Gabriel's bride and cursed himself for not doing better research. Sometimes being a rash Gryffindor sucked.

"Monsieur Weasley," she smiled, and Ron nodded dumbly. "It is nice to meet you," she said, deliberately enunciating every syllable. "Thank you for inviting me here tonight."

"I-it's my pleasure," he stuttered, finally stepping forward, not quite sure whether he ought to be offering his hand to shake or bowing to her.

She smiled, a sweet expression that made her look so unlike Gabriel that it startled Ron all over again. She solved his dilemma by presenting her hand to him, palm down. He bowed over it like he'd seen Neville do when he was goofing off with Ginny. It was apparently the right move, as she laughed in delight.

"Th-thank you for coming, Lady mal Théa," he said as he stood.

"Fayette, s'il vous plait. I am not a Lady of the Family, Monsieur Weasley."

"F-Fayette? Er, you can call me Ron. Ronald. Ron. Just Ron."

"You do not have to be nervous," she told him earnestly, peering up at him with big brown eyes. "I am much nicer than my husband." A little wink came with the last bit, and once again Ron was thrown for a loop.

"Shall we?" she gestured toward the door. He nodded, turning to exit. She slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow, still smiling cheerfully.

"Er, you're not really what I was expecting," Ron admitted as he led her toward the Great Hall.

"Vraiment? What were you expecting?"

"A blonde," he blurted. Fayette laughed, diamonds glistening as she tipped her head back slightly. "No! No, that's not what I meant! I meant... I wasn't... I was expecting someone... More..."

"French?" she inquired drolly. Ron nodded helplessly. Fayette shrugged, smiling mysteriously, but made no further comment. They walked in silence for a while longer.

"You're very pretty," Ron blurted, unable to take the awkwardness.

"Merci."

"Um, what do you call what you're wearing?" Girls always wanted to talk about clothing. That would keep it from getting awkward again, at least until they joined the other students in the Great Hall...

"It is a sumar kameez," she informed him, sounding pleased that he asked. "It is more – how do you say? – practical than a sari."

"Oh." Ron had no idea what any of that meant, but he smiled and tried to get her to keep talking. "Well, it looks very nice. The, er, color is quite vibrant." One thing you learned when you had a younger sister was what the current fashion was. He wondered what Ginny would make of Fayette's obvious divergence from vogue.

Fayette smiled, but didn't rise to the invitation. The conversation lulled again, and the little girl peered around in interest.

"It is so ugly!" she exclaimed at last, as she looked down a particularly long dark corridor. "How can anyone learn in such an ugly place?"

"Excuse me?" Ron stared at her, taken aback. He'd never thought of Hogwarts as ugly before. Majestic, magical, old – all of these. But while he'd never thought of it as particularly beautiful, ugly had never crossed his mind.

He was spared the possible argument, however, as they reached the open doors to the Great Hall. In his fourth year, Ron had found the sight of the Yule festivities magnificent. Now, he just wanted to find Hermione and switch partners with Gabriel.

"Dance with me," Fayette instructed, her eyes on the dancers.

"I-I can't!" Ron's eyes widened. "I'm a horrible dancer!" His eyes turned to Malfoy and Parkinson gracefully sweeping the floor, and he blushed angrily. Why couldn't he dance like that?

The dance ended within a few beats anyways, but before he could point this out to Fayette, she'd gasped and hurried forward. Ron followed her, pushing through the crowd of students to stand at the edge of the circle and watch the new set of dancers.

He couldn't tear his eyes away.

Hermione was beautiful. She was wearing something little and black and obviously Muggle. Ron felt a surge of jealousy that he wasn't the one out there putting his hands all over her. And Gabriel was putting his hands all over her. Ron gaped as his roommate flipped Hermione over his arm as if she weighed nothing.

The song ended with Hermione arched backwards in a dramatic dip, and the watchers gave a thunderous applause. Ron couldn't tear his eyes away until the couple had left the dance floor. Only then did he look to see what his companion's reaction was.

Contrary to his own glow of jealousy, Fayette was glowing with excitement. He had no time to ponder this, as she was already pulling him through the crowd to reach the table Gabriel and Hermione were sitting at.

"You will dance with me later," she told him over the music. Ron gulped. He had a feeling she was used to dancing the way Parkinson, and apparently Hermione, danced. And since when was Hermione able to dance like that? She hadn't been able to last year,

had she? Was he that unobservant? If he'd known she liked to dance, he would've learned!

His thoughts took him to the table where Hermione sat with Ginny, Neville, Gabriel, and those two Ravenclaws. Fayette paused before they approached, carefully placing her hand back on his arm and throwing Ron a cheerful wink.

She pulled him gently forward until they were at the table. Ginny was the only one who looked over at them, and she waved hello to her brother. She did a double take at his companion. He watched her eyes drink in Fayette's outfit, then jewels, then face.

"I don't know you," Ginny said in confusion, drawing everyone's attention. "Ron, who is this?"

"Did you see Weasley got himself some arm candy?" Tracey sneered, sitting down between Daphne and Pansy. "Tiny thing, no fashion sense whatsoever."

"You mean the one whose necklace is worth more than your dowry?" Daphne quipped, arching an eyebrow.

Tracey glared as Pansy let out a barking laugh. "Poor Tracey," she cooed.

Tracey sniffed, crossing her arms over her chest. "Be quiet, Pansy. I want to know where Weasley found her. She's not a Hogwarts student."

"That is Fayette mal Théa," Rousseau drawled from across the table. "Pretty little thing, is she not? The lads at Beauxbaton were heartbroken she married the Lieutenant-General."

"Mal Théa's wife?" Pansy gasped, finally taking notice. She craned her neck to try and catch another glimpse of the girl. "How did Weasley...?"

"Black magic, no doubt," Tracey sniffed.

"You can be such an idiot, Tracey," sneered Pansy.

Rousseau smirked as Tracey and Pansy began bickering. Daphne, on the other hand, leaned back as she watched the girl.

"She's his cousin," she said abruptly. "Fayette mal Théa is the daughter of Akshay and Genevieve mal Théa, and the Lieutenant-General is the son of Sarai mal Théa."

Pansy and Tracey stopped bickering, turning to look at the contemplative Daphne.

"How do you know," Pansy scoffed.

"I am acquainted with the family. Miriam Defayne is my godmother."

"Who?" Tracey blinked.

Hermione looked up at Ginny's surprised exclamation. Ron was standing awkwardly by their table, face red. Her eyes lingered on his neat gray robes and carefully groomed hair before looking over at the cause of Ginny's cry.

The girl was short and looked remarkably like Brie. Her eyes were a bright honey brown and her features were more delicate, but the resemblance was striking. She was dressed in a vibrant blue that matched the shade in Brie's outfit so perfectly that it was obviously done on purpose. The outfit itself was almost as out of place in the setting as Hermione's. A loose, flowing tunic hung down to the girl's knees and was weighted down by stylized flowering vines picked out in emeralds and sapphires. Underneath the tunic she wore loose pants with the same flowering vines at the hems. Even her dainty little slippers glistened with jewels.

Hermione felt a glow of envy. So that was what Ron was interested in. She shouldn't be surprised – Ron had always been attracted to money. It made sense that he would want a girl who was literally covered in it.

"Fae!" Levi had shot up in his seat and was embracing the little girl, speaking rapidly in a language Hermione couldn't understand. Rzaeva looked strangely at peace with her boyfriend's enthusiastic greeting of an apparent stranger.

It wasn't until she glanced over at Brie that her mind connected several pieces of information very quickly.

Gabriel's boggart had featured three bodies, and now she'd met them all: Levi, Hr Sinclair, and the little girl. This little girl. Hermione's face paled and for a moment she felt like she was going to be sick. Her mind vividly recalled the horrific vision – somehow it was made more horrible to see the child alive and well, smiling beautifully at them from an unmarred face.

Then it went away.

She was once again focused on the present, with the pretty girl-child smiling at them with be-gemmed splendor from her place at Ron's side. Levi finished chattering, and Ginny prodded her brother.

"Er, right," Ron coughed. "Guys, this is Fayette mal Théa. Fayette, these are my friends Hermione Granger and Neville Longbottom, and my sister Ginny."

Hermione blinked. Mal Théa. That explained the resemblance. This must be a cousin of some sort. But wait, wasn't Gabriel's wife...

"Bonsoir," she smiled at them all. Then she winked at Brie. "Surprise, husband."

Chapter Twenty Three: Rumors

"Who was that girl mal Théa danced with?"

"Who, Granger?"

"No! The other one. Didn't you notice her?"

"Um..."

"Honestly, Terry, sometimes I don't know why you're in Ravenclaw."

"Hey! It's not my fault I didn't see some bint! I was focused on more important things, like you."

"Don't try and get out of this by flattery, hun. I know you too well. Anyway, after he did that peculiar dance—"

"Lindy hop."

"Whatever. Don't interrupt. After he did that dance with Granger, he did the Tango with an Indian girl. I was sure I knew all the Indian girls at Hogwarts! I didn't recognize her at all!"

"Why do you care?"

"Because! I don't know, I just do! I'm Ravenclaw. I need to know stuff."

"Ah, come on Padma! Just let it go."

"For now. I will find out who she was."

"Why don't you just ask your sister?"

"Ooh! Good idea! She might know."

"Hey Parvati! Wait up! Oh, hi Lavender."

"Hey Pad."

"Hi Padma."

"I was wondering if you knew anything about that girl who danced with mal Théa last night. I think she danced with Weasley and Longbottom a couple times too, and I know she danced with Defayne..."

"Oh her? Bleh. Horrid little thing, wasn't she. No sense of fashion at all!"

"Oh, I don't know. I thought she was pretty cute – and her fashion sense was just fine, Lav. I was wearing Indian fashion too, you know."

"You don't count, Par."

"Gee, thanks Lav."

"Not what I meant!"

"Back on topic! Gryffindors, geez. No offense."

"None taken."

"So what about that girl?"

"I just want to know who she is."

"Fae something or other. That's what they were all calling her, at least."

"I heard that Weasley invited her from Beauxbatons when he couldn't get Hermione. She was sooo jealous!"

"I heard that girl last night was an Indian Princess!"

"Did you hear about Weasley's new girlfriend?"

"I heard Weasley has been secretly dating an Indian Princess for years!"

"I heard that mal Théa tried to rip off Weasley's head, he was so jealous!"

"I think she cast some sort of spell to make all the boys fall in love with her."

"Did you see her jewelry? I bet they were the crystallized souls of all the men she's preyed on!"

"I heard she spent the night!"

Brie's eyes drifted open as Fae snuggled closer, burying her nose in his chest. He smiled down at her, softly smoothing her hair back from her face. He had missed this – waking up with the girl he loved in his arms, seeing her peaceful face – all of it. Well, he could do without the drool spot.

For once he decided not to get up and exercise. He wanted to enjoy a lazy morning with Fae before he had to return to routine. Besides, his legs were throbbing after all the dancing he'd done last night. He had almost broken them twice, and only quick spells had saved him the humiliation. A morning of rest and relaxation was definitely in order before they hopped the train in the afternoon.

"Mmm," Fae stretched catlike against him, little hands kneading the silk of his nightshirt.

"(Good morning, sunshine,)" Brie grinned, stroking her cheek. "(Sleep well?)"

"Mhmm."

They continued to lay there, Fae slowly waking up as Brie stroked her hair and her face. Both were content to simply be in the other's presence. It was a rare moment of solitude for both of them, and Brie felt refreshed. He had needed this since school had started.

"(I love you,)" Fae murmured as she finally opened her eyes. "(Thank you for last night.)"

"(It was my pleasure. I'm glad you made it – I was starting to worry that Ron wouldn't take the damn hint.)"

Fae giggled. "(Don't blame him – Meli can be subtle.)"

"(For a boy who is that good at chess, he can be astonishingly slow on the uptake,)" Brie acknowledged, eyes sparkling with amusement. "(I wonder if he's figured out that he's been played?)"

The morning after the Ball was a lazy affair. Many of the students chose to sleep in, while some couldn't resist being the first to start the post-festivities gossip circulating. Ginny couldn't wait to start gossiping.

Hermione was the only one left in her dorm at 8:30 when Ginny came in to wake her up. With a grin, the excited redhead jumped haphazardly onto the bed, startling Hermione awake.

"Rise and shine, sleepy head!"

"Wha? Gin? What's going on?"

"So what did you think of the band?"

"What?"

"Me too! What on earth were they thinking with that music! They needed more waltzes and less of that weirdo Muggle crap. Nothing against Muggles, of course!"

"I don't-"

"That's okay. Did you see Chang's robes! They were hideous! Her tailor should be Avadaed for those! Honestly,"

"Gin."

"that girl should not be wearing yellow. Midgeon's robes were nice, though."

"Ginny."

"Four layers! And such a gorgeous color! I wasn't sure anything existed that could flatter her, but sometimes its nice to be proven wrong. And-"

"Ginevra Weasley, what do you think you're doing?"

"Gossiping. Obviously."

"Ginny, dear, it's 8:30 in the morning. I want to be asleep right now."

"Really? Oh. Well, I guess I won't tell you what Ron told me about that Indian girl, what's her face. Fae."

"What did Ron tell you?"

"Nu uh! You want to be asleep," Ginny shrugged as she hopped off the bed and sauntered toward the door.

"Ginny! Tell me!" Hermione sat up, leaning forward.

"Go back to sleep, Hermione. I'm sure someone else will tell you after you've gotten your beauty rest."

"Ginny!" Growling, Hermione rolled out of bed and hurried after her departing friend. She wanted to know what Ron said!

The Gryffindor boys were less inclined to join in the gossip, and were still in bed. Dean was awake and doodling, but wasn't inclined to actually get up and do anything. He was somewhat intrigued by the movement of Gabriel's bed curtains, though, and his attention kept drifting to watch them. There was no pattern to the movement, and it wasn't the rustling of a breeze or even of restless sleep. It was odd.

When Ginny and Hermione burst into the room, talking loudly and dressed only in nightgowns, Dean was understandably startled.

"What are you doing?" he squawked, hurriedly hiding his sketch. "You can't be in here!"

"Of course we can – we're here, aren't we?" Ginny replied. "Besides, we come in here all the time to hang out with Nev!"

"Not early in the morning, you don't," Dean grumbled as his roommates began waking up.

"Is Brie in here?" Hermione asked, pointing to the only bed with closed curtains.

"Yeah," Dean agreed, wondering whether he could make it to the bathroom without having either girl actually look at him. "Why don't you GO AWAY and I'll tell him you were here?"

"What's wrong, Dean, do you sleep in your skivvies or something?" Ginny teased. She laughed when Dean blushed. "You do!" she crowed. "That's priceless! Come on, Dean, show us your skivvies!"

As Ginny continued to torment the boy, Hermione was attempting to fling open Brie's curtains so she could say good morning.

"They won't open," a sleepy Neville informed her from the next bed over. "He's magicked them closed somehow."

"Morning Nev," Hermione greeted absently. "How do you wake him up in the morning?"

"We don't," he yawned, stretching. "He's usually up first."

"Oh. So how do I wake him up this morning?"

"I have no idea," he rolled out of bed and shuffled over to the bathroom, grateful for his nightshirt.

Hermione put her hands on her hips, frowning as she inspected the apparently impenetrable defenses that Brie had placed around his sleeping area. Finally she gave up and flopped down on Neville's currently empty bed. Absently pulling up the covers, she closed her eyes.

Hermione was woken up half an hour later when Professor McGonagall entered their dormitory, a flock of curious students crowding behind her.

"What is the meaning of this?" she barked, taking in Hermione curled up with Neville in his bed and Ginny stretched out at Dean's feet. "This is not a co-ed dormitory! Miss Granger, Miss Weasley, I expect better of both of you!"

Hermione was too sleep-muddled to come up with a rebuttal, and simply stared at her Head of House through lidded eyes. Ginny, wide awake and feeling snippy, sat up and crossed her arms.

"Hermione and I are just visiting," she stated. "We didn't spend the night, if that's what you're worked up about, Professor. Can't we hang out with our friends?"

"In your nightdress?" McGonagall blustered.

Ginny shrugged carelessly. "We do it all the time," she said.

McGonagall frowned, but then turned her attention to the still closed curtains around Brie's bed. Hermione followed her gaze, then blinked. Oh! The Ball, the guest... The Hogwarts rumor mill... There was probably some sort of rumor going around about Brie having an "overnight guest" that the Professor was obligated to investigate.

"Professor, do you mind?" Dean was still uncomfortable with the invasion of the dorm, though he'd since gotten the chance to put on a pair of pants and a shirt. There was still something awkward about sitting in bed with a girl while your Professor and a gaggle of Housemates loomed in your door.

"Yeah," Seamus agreed, sitting up. "We were nicely sleeping in here!"

A few lewd comments from the other Gryffindors regarding 'nicely sleeping' with two girls got McGonagall to tell the students to leave.

"In nomus Gryffindor!" she tapped her wand against Brie's bedpost. As Hermione stared, the curtains flew open.

Chapter Twenty Four: Journeys

"(Oh! And we learned about Great Aunt H  l  ne in History last week! It's funny how different the text books make her sound—Mommy says when she was first betrothed to Daddy, Aunt H  l  ne would slip her candy when Grandmama wasn't watching, but Bernadette says that she murdered children for Lord Grindewald. Do you think she did?)"

Brie decided to leave that one alone. If their Great Aunt had been anything like Shay, he wouldn't dismiss the proposal out of hand. Of course, the mal Th  as also had a habit of placing children on a pedestal to be honored and protected – it would require special circumstances for any mal Th  a to kill a child. That didn't mean it never happened.

His answer didn't really matter, anyways – Fae had already drifted on.

They were now sitting up in bed, relaxing and enjoying each other's company. Brie leaned against a pillow pressed to the headboard. Fae sat cross-legged between his legs, alternately rubbing his sore limbs and gesturing animatedly as she spoke. He was carefully combing and plaiting her hair, a task made doubly difficult by her flyaway curls and her inability to sit still.

"(and then pop! Just like that, Professor Hsieh was all pink! Rance and Provost are even worse than you when it comes to getting even with the professors, if you believe it. Not as creative, though... Which reminds me, I need a way to get back at them. They had the gall to prank me the other day!)"

"(How bad?)" Brie inquired, frowning slightly. He'd only met Sergey Provost once, but he knew that Rance could get rather mean-spirited about his pranks sometimes. Generally it wasn't an issue between family members, but there was always a slim chance that something had happened between the cousins.

Fae shrugged, looking over her shoulder to grin at him and in the process pulling her half braided hair out of his hand. He watched it

unravel with some exasperation, but his wife's disarming smile quickly distracted him.

"(Not so bad. It only lasted a minute or two – I sniffled ominously and Rance remembered that with winter break so close, you would have easy access to him. They both apologized and removed the curse.)"

"(Are you looking for public humiliation?)" he inquired, steering the conversation back to her original point of needing a creative way to retaliate.

"(Definitely. Nothing too bad, though – I don't want to start a war.)"

"(I'll think of something. Now turn around and sit still, darling, or I'll never get your hair braided.)"

"(Sorry love!)" She turned around and settled back down, idly rubbing his legs for lack of anything better to do with her boundless energy.

"(How is your Herbology class going?)"

With an amused giggle, she was off again. Brie relaxed with a happy little smile, letting her words flow over him. He loved to listen to her talk. She was so excited about everything, it was infectious. Not to mention utterly adorable. He pulled her hair back together and began carefully braiding it once more.

Fae was in the middle of an animated retelling of the baby devil's snare that had 'hugged' Professor Laurence to the point of unconsciousness when the walls of their private haven were abruptly torn open.

Hermione blinked and propped herself up on her elbow to get a better look at the strange scene. Brie was lounging, relaxed, braiding Fayette's hair and –dare she say it– smiling sweetly. He had a mild case of bed-head, and he looked altogether almost human. In the back of her mind, Hermione noted that it was completely not a surprise to find him as completely clothed as ever; his pajamas even had a high neck and matching socks. Fayette, on the other hand, was only wearing what was obviously one of Brie's shirts. It was slipping off one slim shoulder, and pooled in her

otherwise bare lap. She seemed amazingly unconcerned about the sudden intrusion and her state of undress.

In fact, both of them looked remarkably unconcerned and unsurprised - almost as though they were expecting a flustered professor and a gaggle of school children to come bursting in on them in bed.

McGonagall looked fit to burst. Whatever she had been expecting, it obviously wasn't her transfer student in bed with a barely clothed child. She opened her mouth to say something, then closed it, then opened it again.

"Mr. mal Théa, what in Merlin's name is the meaning of this! This is going too far! Do you have any concept of respect and obeying the rules? Do you even know the meaning of those words?"

Fayette was regarding her like a fascinating alien creature as Brie tied a bow at the end of her plait.

McGonagall's mouth tightened when neither mal Théa responded to her queries. She drew herself up to her full height and looked extremely strict. "I don't know who you are," she said, focusing on Fayette, "but you are not one of my students and therefore should not be here. I don't know what Mr. mal Théa told you to lure you into his bed, child, but I assure you we will be contacting your parents immediately."

"Brie, this woman is speaking to me, but we have not been introduced," Fayette frowned, turning to look at Brie.

"My bad," drawled her husband.

Hermione had to stifle a giggle at his very Muggle-American turn of phrase. She had almost stopped being surprised by it, but it still amused her. She only wished he wouldn't be so cavalier in the face of authority.

"Fae, this is Professor McGonagall. Professor, this is Fayette mal Théa."

Professor McGonagall opened her mouth to respond, but Fayette beat her to it. The little girl leaned forward earnestly, locking eyes

with the older woman. Hermione couldn't really see her face, but she could see McGonagall's, and she was looking nonplussed.

"It is very nice to meet you Madam, though it is a pity the circumstances could not have been better. Good impressions mean a lot."

The earnestness was palpable in Fayette's very young-sounding voice, and it was obvious that it wasn't the impression she was making that she was concerned about. Hermione was amazed at how easily the half-naked child attempted to manipulate the situation.

"I am sorry you were kept out of the –" She turned to Brie for a moment, asking something in French. Hermione saw nothing but honesty and compassion on her face.

"The loop," Brie supplied.

"Yes. I am very sorry that you were kept out of the loop, Madam McGonagall. I was invited to attend your winter dance by Ronald, and Monsieur Dumbledore extended the hospitality of his school, for which I am very grateful. Gabriel," she gave Brie a very loving smile over her shoulder, "invited me to stay for the night. I am sorry if I have overstayed my welcome."

Professor McGonagall sighed, bringing her hand to her temple before refocusing on the mal Théas.

"Miss mal Théa, maybe the rules are different in France, but here at Hogwarts girls don't sleep in the same rooms as boys – especially not in the same beds. If you planned to spend the night, the Headmaster or I would have been happy to arrange an alternate sleeping arrangement for you. We really must contact your parents now."

"Why?" she queried, leaning forward again, causing her braid to slip over her shoulder.

"Because you are a child and by law – and my conscience – your legal guardians must be informed of what occurred here, whether or not you two are related, Miss mal Théa."

As Hermione watched, Brie smirked, snaking his hands around his wife's stomach and pulling her back to lean against his chest. He looked extremely pleased with himself as Fayette stared up at McGonagall with wide, innocent eyes.

"Actually, it is Mrs. mal Théa. And Gabriel has full legal authority over me."

The train ride home was long and loud. Most of the students were still exhausted from the Yule Ball the night before, but a few Pepper Ups ensured everyone a maximum amount of time to say goodbye to friends. Gossip flew up and down the train as everyone tried to have the last word before the holidays.

When the train finally pulled into the London station, Hermione and her friends were among the last to disembark. As always, the platform was bustling. Everyone was yelling and laughing and screaming and otherwise being as loud as possible. The mood was festive and infectious. Hermione grinned as Neville and Seamus both disappeared into the crowd, resurfacing further out with their families.

"Redheads, four o'clock!" called Dean, fighting to be heard over the crowd. Ginny and Ron immediately oriented themselves toward their clan, disappearing with a last round of hearty farewells.

"Just you and me," Hermione slung her arm over the shoulder of her taller friend.

"We Muggleborn gotta stick together," Dean laughed, slapping her back companionably.

Slogging through the crowd was slow going. Even without the troublesome trunks, it took them nearly ten minutes to make it out into the Muggle station. They both heaved a sigh of relief as they stepped through the barrier.

"Home again, home again," Hermione smiled. "You off?"

"Yeah," Dean shrugged, scanning the station, perking up as he caught sight of his mother. "Have a Happy Christmas, Hermione! I'll call you on New Years."

"Happy Christmas, Dean." With one last cheerful wave, Hermione was alone.

Making her way to a nearby bench, she sat down and watched the trickle of people out of platform 9¾. Almost all of those who actually exited through King's Cross were Muggleborn, as most magical families preferred magical transportation.

Thus, Hermione was somewhat surprised to see Brie, Fae, Levi, and Anya walk through the brick wall into Muggle London. She was even more surprised to see they were all comfortably dressed in stylish Muggle clothes. They had ridden in a different compartment, and Hermione hadn't even been sure they were on the train at all. She'd known the transfers were supposed to ride the train "for the experience," but she also knew Brie well enough to expect him to disobey.

"Brie!" Hermione hopped off her bench, waving her arm to catch his attention.

His eyes were on her immediately, and she blushed as he raised his eyebrow at her casual jeans and sweater ensemble. She hated how he never looked overdressed in his suits and fancy clothes – everyone else, namely her, always looked underdressed instead. Forcing a smile, she walked over to the other students.

"Hermione," Brie's face was blank, but he moved aside to welcome her into the group.

"Hello again," Fae gave her a warm smile that made up for her husband's cool disregard. (Hermione was still having trouble getting her mind around the husband-wife thing, but she figured if she kept calling them that in her head it would eventually sink in.)

"Hi, you guys have a good trip?"

"We did. And yourself?" Levi returned politely.

"Long and loud," Hermione smiled, shrugging. "Could've been worse."

"Are you waiting for someone?" Brie asked, eyes continuously scanning the station. He seemed unusually tense, and Hermione

noticed that he seemed to be using his wife for support. Not for the first time, Hermione wondered exactly what was wrong with his leg. Or legs.

"Oh! Um, my parents are supposed to meet me here, but I guess they're running a bit late." Hermione frowned, glancing up at the station clock. Her eyebrows shot up when she saw the time. They were nearly half an hour late. For the first time, Hermione began to feel a bit worried.

"Can you give them a call?"

"I don't have any change for a pay phone," she admitted, glancing at the clock again.

"You can use mine," Fae offered, sticking her hand in the pocket of Brie's slacks. After a moment of fishing, she pulled out a little pink phone and tossed it to Hermione.

"You carry a cell phone?" Hermione asked, surprised. That technology wasn't even common in the Muggle World yet and she had never seen a cell phone as small as the one she was now holding.

"Sure," the little girl shrugged. "Kali knows it is very much useful."

"I thought technology isn't compatible with magic."

The girl shrugged again.

"How does it work in school and other strong magical environments?" Hermione pressed.

"It just does," Fae replied dismissively.

For a moment Hermione was tempted to keep asking questions, but a quelling glance from Brie stopped her. With a quick thank you, Hermione dialed home. As she waited for someone to pick up, the group drifted over toward a bench. Brie sat down with deliberate slowness, stretching out his legs with apparent relief. Fae sat down next to him, but Levi and Anya drifted a ways off, conversing softly in Russian.

No one was home and Sandy in the office hadn't seen either in several hours. She left a message at both places, saying she was safe and with friends, and they should call her back right away. By now, she had made up her mind to worry.

"I can't get a hold of them," Hermione said as she handed back the phone. "As far as I can tell, they left the office to come pick me up, but..."

"It will be okay," Fae reached over and squeezed Hermione's hand. "You can come with us, yes? We are meeting Mama Rai for supper in London. It will be fun." Her smile was so guileless that Hermione couldn't help smiling back.

Inwardly she pictured the outing with a cringe. To start with, she looked like a ragamuffin compared to the four foreigners. Even Fae, who was wearing what must be one of Brie's turtlenecks, transfigured into a dress, looked impeccable and stylish. She didn't even want to think about what 'Mama Rai' would look like.

And then there was the language barrier to consider. Yes, the children were all being conscientious and speaking in English: did their mother even know the language? Would she go out of her way to include Hermione?

And what about social status? Or the blood issue? Heritage? The fact they were all related? Hermione couldn't imagine it being anything but horrible.

"Um, that's really kind of you, but I don't know..."

"Please? I want you to come." And Hermione had the feeling this girl was used to getting what she wanted.

"Really, I'm not sure if..."

"You are welcome to come," Brie interrupted, tearing his eyes away from Levi and Anya to face her. "I'm not comfortable leaving you here alone."

"I'll be fine," she shrugged, blushing. "It's probably just traffic. We don't actually live in London, you know. It's an hour trip on a good

day. They should be here any second, and I don't want them to worry."

"We'll wait with you, then," Brie announced, settling himself more comfortably on the bench. "If your parents are still MIA when mother gets here, you can come with us for supper."

His tone booked no argument, and Hermione was actually quite grateful for the company. She was fairly certain nothing would happen to her, especially with magic at her disposal, but it was still nice to have someone watching out for her. After a few false starts, the three began a genial conversation about dancing.

"Hermione!"

Hermione looked up in surprise at the call. She grinned in relief as she saw her parents waving as they hurried toward her. She stood to greet them, barely noticing as her companions both rose as well.

"Mum, Dad! I was worried!" She gave them each a hard hug, and they exchanged a quick round of 'I love you' and 'sorry to make you wait'.

As soon as the initial greetings were over, the Grangers turned to the mal Théas, who had been standing politely to the side.

"Guys," Hermione colored slightly at using the extremely casual term for her elegant friends, but plowed ahead. "These are my parents, Drs. Geoffrey and Sarah Granger. Mum, Dad, Gabriel and Fayette mal Théa. They've been keeping me company."

"Nice to meet you," Sarah smiled, her arm around Hermione's shoulders.

"Thank you for watching out for our daughter," Geoffrey added, offering his hand first to Brie, then Fae.

"Ce n'est pas problem," Fae returned brightly, arm wrapped around her husband's waist. Brie merely gazed past them indifferently.

"I hope we haven't kept you from your own family," Sarah worried, eyes flicking between the bright little girl and brooding teen.

Fae waved her hand dismissively. "Mama is not yet arrived. It was no problem to stay. Gabriel needed to sit down anyway," she added, throwing a disapproving frown up at the boy she was discretely supporting.

"Fayette," Brie rebuked. He said something more in what Hermione could now identify as Hindi, and the tone left no doubt that he was scolding her. Fae threw something back that sounded equally scathing, and he subsided. She turned back to the Grangers with a smile.

"Please have a nice holiday, Hermione, Dr Granger, Dr Granger. Give me a call sometime about those lessons," she added earnestly, focusing her sunny smile on Hermione.

"Thanks, Fae. I appreciate it. You too, Brie. Have a good holiday."

Fae watched the English girl walk away with her parents. As soon as they were in the crowd, she stepped away from her husband. Placing her hands on her hips, she proceeded to glare at him until he sat down on the bench.

"(How many times do I have to tell you not to push yourself, Brie! You would think with Ami for a sister you would learn not to test your limits.)"

"(Is my son making a butt of himself?)"

"(Mom!)" Brie made an abortive attempt to stand. "(Mama Rai!)" Fae cried at the same time, spinning to face her aunt and mother-in-law.

Rai smiled, opening her arms in a welcoming gesture. With her bright yellow and orange sari, she looked as out of place as a stray English wizard. To Fae she was a welcome and familiar sight. In a heart beat, the almost-twelve-year-old was enveloped in the welcoming arms of her second mother. Rai laughed, rubbing her back and kissing her forehead affectionately.

"(Boing,)" she said, tugging on one of the ringlets that framed Fae's face, eliciting the same giggled response she'd gotten for the past eleven years. "(Who was that?)" she added as she pulled back.

"(Gee mom, nice to see you too,)" Brie rolled his eyes, leaning back on the bench.

"(What?)" Rai smirked, quirking her head slightly. "(Is widdle Gabby feeling slighted?)"

"(No, 'widdle Gabby' is in too much pain to play games with a woman.)"

"(Ooh, ouch! Demoted to a gender qualification. I think he's feeling quite slighted. What do you think, daughter mine?)"

"(I'm thinking you better go give him a great big kiss and make him all better, Mama,)" Fae laughed, enjoying their antics. She'd missed them so much since school started! When he'd been attending Beauxbatons, Brie had spent more time at home than he had at school. Since he had gone to Hogwarts, however, she had only seen him once before last night and she hadn't seen Rai at all.

"(Well, you heard the girl. A big kiss it is.)" Before Brie had a chance to protest, Rai swooped down and planted a wet, noisy kiss on the end of his nose. He scowled half heartedly at her as she plopped down next to him, but both girls knew him too well to believe him anything but pleased.

"(So, baby. Did you have a good trip?)"

"(It was fine, thank you.)" He carefully wiped off his nose as Fae settled down on his other side. "(I think you'll like Levi's Anya. She reminds me of Aunt Miri and Aunt Tatjyana, strangely enough.)"

"(Oh dear. Is that her over there?)" Rai leaned forward to peer through the crowd.

"(Yep!)" Fae said, smiling brightly. "(She's very knowledgeable about Russian fashion.)"

"(They carried on for almost an hour,)" Brie added, fondly exasperated.

"(Oh, hush. You and Levi were busy discussing Our Plan – I was merely providing a distraction so she wouldn't feel left out.)"

"(You keep telling yourself that,)" Brie laughed, giving her a one armed hug.

"(Thank you, I will,)" she sniffed imperiously before cracking a smile.

"(I missed you kids,)" Rai shook her head. "(You ready to head out? We have reservations, you know.)"

"(Sure. I'll go get Levi and Anya.)" As she skipped over toward the couple, she heard Rai once again ask about who had been waiting with them a moment before she had appeared.

Hermione stared down at the heavy parchment envelope, more than a little confused. Who would be owling her anything, especially so soon after break started? She had already exchanged gifts with her friends, and anyone who might want to contact her had faster methods.

Besides, no one she knew had a pure white owl or sent letters with embossed gold seals.

"What's that dear?"

Hermione looked up as her mother sat down next to her at the kitchen table.

"I'm not sure," Hermione confessed, returning to her inspection. "A rather pompous looking owl dropped it in my lap this morning. I have no idea who might have sent it."

"How does an owl look pompous?" Sarah inquired, craning her neck to see the strange envelope.

"Oh, you know. Big, fluffy, imperious – you know the type."

"Like your friend the other day? What's his name – Gabriel?"

"Yeah," Hermione grinned at the comparison. "A bit like Brie, although he isn't pompous so much as an arrogant pain in the... yeah. Like Brie."

"Well, open it!" Sarah nudged her shoulder. "Aren't you dying of curiosity?"

Hermione laughed at her mother, finally gathering her courage and popping the seal. The card she pulled out was heavy and seemed to glow in the light. Like the seal, it was embossed in gold, with an elaborate coat of arms decorating the top. Hermione reminded herself to buy a book on the Wizarding families' crests and coat of arms.

"Miss Hermione Jane Granger," she read for her mother's benefit, struggling slightly with the ornate lettering. "You are cordially invited to attend the informal Celebration preceding Gabriel Reuben-Amrit mal Théa's Rite of Adulthood, this thirtieth day of December of the year nineteen hundred and ninety six. The Celebration will occur at the home of his Lady mother, Sarai mal Théa..."

Hermione trailed off in shock, staring at the card.

"Oh, that sounds fun," Sarah smiled, sipping her coffee. "Like a Wizarding bar mitzvah! Do you need to RSVP?"

"I can't go."

"Why not? This is the Gabriel we met at the station, right? You seemed to like him well enough five minutes ago."

"He lives in America, mom."

"What?" Sarah sounded surprised, and Hermione looked up at her mother with wide eyes.

"The party. It's going to be at his mother's house in America. I can't afford a plane ticket, let alone a trans-Atlantic portkey!"

Inwardly, Hermione was thinking that this explained quite a lot about Brie. No wonder he used American phrases so often, and especially no wonder that he referenced American pop culture. From what she had read, the American Society of Wizards – their version of the Wizarding World – was far more integrated with the Muggle world than their English counterparts, although many of the upper class purebloods still kept their distance. Still, it explained a lot about her mysterious friend.

After spending the entire day obsessing about the invitation, Hermione decided to take drastic measures. She still felt stupid kneeling in front of a fireplace. Unfortunately Neville didn't have a phone, and calling him via floo was her only option. Taking a deep breath and thrusting her head through the flames, she opened her eyes to look out at Neville's parlor.

"Neville?" she called.

A house elf quite literally appeared to take her name and business, then told her to wait a moment. A minute later Neville hurried into the room, casual robes billowing slightly as he plopped down in front of the fireplace.

"Hermione! Don't often get your head in the fire," he grinned.

"Brie sent me a funny card," Hermione informed him, getting straight to the point. She hated floo calls.

"Really?" Neville's grin broadened. "Excellent! I didn't think it would just be me – Ms Rai doesn't hold with all that pureblood crap when it comes to parties. What's the problem?"

"Well, to start, what on earth is this party?"

"It's a coming of age thing," Neville shrugged. "I'll have one this summer. We're invited to the informal party, which is for friends. The ceremony itself is for family, and there's a formal party the next day that's about entering society as an adult. We won't be invited to that one."

"Okay, I've read about the coming of age ceremonies, but I hadn't heard about the before and after parties. Geez, three whole days of partying! But back to the 'oh-my-gosh-what-am-i-supposed-to-do' thing. How informal is Informal? What am I supposed to wear? Do I bring a gift? How do I get there?"

"Slow down!" Neville laughed. "Wear what you would to a nice dinner party, and you've got Informal. Don't worry about Wizarding robes – Ms Rai doesn't make a fuss over that. You can bring a gift if you want, but don't worry too much about it – don't strain your bank account. And what do you mean how will you get there?"

Hermione sighed in relief at hearing she didn't need to wear robes – that made life easier, at least. Her face fell at the gift comment, however. Strain her bank account? She hated having rich friends.

"Well, the invitation says he lives in America, Neville! How am I supposed to get to America?"

"The card is a Portkey," Neville informed her, obviously surprised she hadn't known that. "I'm not sure how the International thing will work, but it'll probably take you to the Seattle drop-point, and you'll either floo or catch the MagiCab from there."

"Will you come with me?" she asked worriedly.

"Oh, no. Grandma's invited to the event after, so we'll be vacationing in America already. Sorry. It's pretty simple, though – even I can do it," he added earnestly, eliciting a laugh from his friend.

"Thanks, Nev. I guess I'll see you at the bar mitzvah?"

"The what?" Neville was asking, just as Hermione disappeared from the fire. She really, really hated floo calls.

Hermione tugged her jacket back into place as she stood up and inspected her new surroundings. The room was small and empty except for herself. A sign over the door read "Welcome to Seattle." To the left was a list of things visitors may like to know upon arrival, such as where to purchase Wizarding Tour packages and how to cast unobtrusive water repelling spells.

The International Portkey hadn't been nearly as bad as she'd feared – no worse than a normal Portkey, in fact. Instantaneous transportation to halfway around the world still boggled her mind, but she'd gotten a little more accustomed to magic in recent years. Still, it was hard to believe that a moment earlier she had been in her living room, and now she was in the States.

A woman stuck her head through the door and beamed at her. Hermione smiled hesitantly back, clutching her purse nervously.

"Welcome to Seattle," the woman stuck out her hand and Hermione shook it. "You must be," the woman glanced down at her checklist, "Her-moin Granger?"

"Hermione," she corrected the American. She smiled, though in the back of her mind she compared the woman's gross mispronunciation with Viktor's from a few years back. At least he had the excuse of not speaking English – not that Americans could speak English, mind you.

"Well, Hermione," the woman carefully enunciated, earning a smile. "I have some paperwork I need you to fill out – just customs stuff. Are you familiar with – what do you people call them? Mumbles? Muddles? You Brit Wizards are so isolationist, it's amazing you can even function. Honestly – anyway, can you use a ballpoint?"

"I know how to use a pen, ma'am," Hermione inserted when the woman paused for breath. She didn't comment on the woman's tangent – she was tempted to defend herself, but rationally she knew she had many of the same opinions of Wizarding Society. She accepted the pen and clipboard and sat down to work.

Ten minutes later she was shaking hands with Sky, another of Brie's guests. They caught a MagiCab together and set off for the party.

The MagiCab stopped at the mouth of a private drive in the middle of pristine nowhere. Hermione gazed around in awe. It was beautiful. Mountains rose all around them, and they had slowed down enough for her to catch a glimpse of a breathtaking waterfall a few miles back. Trees were everywhere, and despite the foot of snow everything was still green.

The only thing missing was Brie's house.

"Welcome to 'Sunshine Cottage'," the driver announced, looking over his shoulder at the two teenagers.

"You can take us to the door," Sky informed him, amused. "I go through this with all the new drivers," the other teen informed her in an aside. "None of them want to venture onto Ms Rai's property for some reason."

"I just graduated Salem, ma'am," the driver shot back. "I had 'Mad Théa' for four years. I ain't goin' any further on her property than I absolutely have to – especially with a name like 'Sunshine Cottage.' I feel bad for her kids," he muttered.

Nevertheless, he began slowly up the winding driveway. The highway quickly disappeared into the trees behind them, and Hermione pressed her nose to the window to drink in the beautiful scenery. She gaped when the house finally came into view. Whatever she'd been expecting, it wasn't this. Sky said something about it being a wedding present from Brie's uncle – that it had originally been a summer home, before Ms Rai had gotten a divorce and moved in on a more permanent basis. She nodded, but was too busy staring to pay much attention.

"It's so... so..."

"Small?" Sky suggested. Hermione shook her head. "Quaint? Charming?"

"Modern," she decided. "And so not a cottage! Small?" she added with an incredulous glance over her shoulder. Sky shrugged with a little smile, and she turned her attention back to the house as they pulled up.

The cab stopped and the front door opened. A middle aged woman stepped outside, carefully shutting the door behind her as she hurried out to greet them.

"Skylee! Bonjour! Tu as un bon voyage?"

"Oui, merci. C'est tres bien, Rosie. Ca va?"

Their greeting reached the limits of Hermione's scant French, and she simply stood there and looked around as the woman pulled out her wand and helped Sky out of the car.

Hermione was amazed all over again by the phenomena of a disabled wizard. On some level she'd known, of course, that wizards could be disabled – Professor Moody had a club leg and a missing eye, and one of the bartenders at the Hogshead only had one arm, after all. It was somehow different to be confronted with a little slip of a kid in a wheelchair. The others were presumably wounds of some sort, gained at an older age. Sky had been born this way.

Hermione watched the teen settle into the chair, gratefully accepting a blanket from the woman. Sky was pretty in a waifish sort of way.

Auburn hair several shades darker than the Weasley red hung in a long braid over one shoulder, stray wisps of hair framing a thin pixie-like face. All of Sky's features were a hair too sharp, and the other teen was almost translucently pale. The overall appearance was that of a sickly twelve year old of indistinct sex.

That was one thing that had been bothering Hermione from the beginning. Skylee was a girl's name – no question there – and it was easy to believe the long hair and feminine green sweater belonged to a girl. The sharp gray eyes and flat chest seemed to persuade otherwise. And there was just something...

Despite her first impression, Hermione was now almost positive that Sky was a boy, despite not protesting over being called "ma'am" by the cab driver. After all, there hadn't been any protest over being called "sir" by the customs officer, either. During the drive she had almost mustered the courage to ask, but they had started talking about the idiosyncrasies of British Wizarding Society and the lingering effects of Middle Age ideology, and she'd lost the opportunity.

She would just have to keep her ears open in case someone who knew the kid dropped a pronoun.

The woman – Rosie – escorted them to the door, pushing Sky's chair as they chatted merrily in French. Hermione tried not to feel awkward. The mal Théa "cottage" was even more beautiful on the inside, and she stared up at the skylights in the entryway, trying not to feel overwhelmed. If this was their idea of a cottage...

"Shoes, please, Miss," Rosie smiled, indicating the little parade of shoes against the wall.

Hermione nodded and bent to unhook her shoes. So much for borrowing her mum's shoes to look more grownup. The wood floors were pleasantly warm against her bare feet, and she was suddenly grateful that she had opted out of a skirt and nylons combo. Rosie abandoned them there in the entry way, flitting off to do heavens knew what – Hermione had gotten the impression that the woman wasn't a party guest.

"Mr. Lee," Ah ha! Male! "Miss Granger, welcome to my home." The speaker was tiny and extremely colorful. She had dark skin, white

hair, and more jewelry than Hermione had ever seen someone wear outside of photographs and films. A dark green sari fell around her like waves, and Hermione felt more comfortable in her choice to wear Muggle clothes.

"Ms mal Théa," her voice had a small question in it as she wondered how she was expected to address this woman. "Thank you for inviting me."

"Ms Rai," she corrected, a little smile darting across her face and lighting up her eyes. She turned those sparkling eyes on Sky, and eyed him with pursed lips. "You're still too thin," she finally decided. "Tell that mother of yours to stop letting you stay up so late, child."

"Sorry Mama Rai," Sky smiled, looking a little sheepish. "It's just that we'll be going to Iceland soon, and – Sorry, Mama," he dropped his gaze.

Hermione watched the interplay with amazement. Mama Rai? This family officially couldn't get any weirder.

"Mother," Brie suddenly interrupted, "Naomi is terrorizing Neville. Will you please explain to her that if she doesn't keep her knives away from my guests, I am going to ritualistically sacrifice her kitten for the New Year? Oh, Hermione. Skylar. You're late."

Hermione stared at Brie, sucking in her lower lip to keep her jaw from dropping. He looked almost relaxed! It was amazing. He was wearing jeans for Merlin's sake! Of course, they were perfectly tailored designer jeans, but they were still denim pants. Matched with a collarless shirt and a pinstriped blazer, he looked less the pureblood aristocrat and more the rich teenager throwing a party for a few friends.

Not to mention the fact she had never seen him in something without a high neck before. He had a nice neck, she decided as she stared at it. She wondered why he usually chose to cover it so thoroughly.

"Sorry sweetie – I hope we didn't inadvertently ruin your life," Sky teased.

"I'll recover." Brie's American accent was strong today, overpowering even the normal traces of French, serving to make him seem even more casual. "Neville might not," he added in an aside to Ms Rai. She rolled her eyes, but walked off in the direction he'd come from. He refocused his attention on the two of them, offering a tiny half smile.

"What's this about Neville?" Hermione asked, nervously focusing on something familiar. Neville in trouble was easier to deal with than a human Gabriel mal Théa.

"The Bitch got bored of eating babies and popped out of the woodwork to torture Englishmen instead. She's just got him cornered and is getting over enthusiastic with her knife. Same old, same old."

"Your sister eats babies?" Hermione repeated weakly. Not that she really believed him, mind. After all, this was coming from a boy who regularly referred to his sister as 'The Bitch,' but still... She was ready to believe almost anything about the mal Théas at this point.

"No, no," Sky hastened to assure her when Brie merely shrugged. "She calls the Apprentice Healers babies. She doesn't eat actual babies. And it's more of a metaphorical sort of eating anyways."

"Oh," said Hermione, trying to smile. Brie gestured for them to follow him deeper into the house and Hermione trailed after Sky. Somehow she had the feeling that this evening would only get weirder.

Chapter Twenty Five: Vanguard

"Thanks for escorting me home," Hermione smiled at the redhead. "International travel is so complicated!"

"My pleasure, Miss Hermione." Her companion said something more, but it wasn't in any language she understood.

"Sky," she said warningly, and the kid grinned sheepishly.

"Thanks for putting up with me. I understand I can be somewhat trying."

"Only when you start speaking Greek in the middle of a goodbye," she told him wryly.

"Oh, that wasn't Greek-"

"Sky."

"See. Somewhat trying." They both laughed.

Hermione glanced up the stairs to her front porch. She had never really noticed the two steps before, because she had never had any trouble getting up them. Usually she just jumped over them both. Now they acted as a barrier that kept her from inviting her new friend inside. Would it be rude to issue an invitation that the wheelchair-bound teen wouldn't be able to accept? Or would it be worse to simply say goodbye on the front lawn?

"Um, could you – I mean, would you like to come in?" she blushed. That didn't sound as smooth as she had intended it.

"I would love to," Sky smiled up at her, eyes crinkling. "Is anyone likely to notice if I cast a levitation spell?"

"Can you do that? I mean, underage restrictions and everything! And no, no one would notice."

"The beautiful thing about being from Egypt is that I only have to answer to Egyptian law. Wingardium leviosa."

Hermione grinned and followed her new friend up onto the porch, then held open the door.

"MOM! DAD! I'm home!"

"Hi honey! Your father is still at the office, so it's just... Oh, hello! Hermione didn't tell me she was bringing a friend."

"Sky brought me home, mom. I figured the least I could do was-"

"Yes, yes," Sarah interrupted, stepping forward and offering her hand to their guest, a big smile firmly spread across her face. "Welcome to our home. I'm Sarah, Hermione's mother."

"Nice to meet you, Ma'am. I'm Sky Lee."

"Skylee? That's such a pretty name! Where are you from? You don't sound British."

"No, Ma'am. I'm from Egypt, actually."

"Ooh, how exotic! When Hermione was little she wanted to be an Egyptologist and explore the pyramids."

"Really?" Sky looked over at Hermione with a grin. "That's a worthy profession."

"I tried to get mom and dad to take me to see the pyramids, but they took me to Paris instead."

"Paris? Well, France is better than nothing," Sky laughed. Hermione rolled her eyes and Sarah beamed happily.

"So how did you two meet?" Sarah asked, sitting down so she was eye level with the redhead. Hermione sat down too, suddenly conscious of the fact she was looming over her friend. "I don't remember Hermione ever talking about you before."

"Sky is one of Brie's friends from before Hogwarts. We hit it off well at the party."

"Oh, that's nice Hermione. Do you know, Skylee, this is the first time Hermione has brought one of her friends home? She goes to their houses during the summer, but she never brings anyone home! I'm so thrilled to meet a friend of hers from the magical world."

Sky shot Hermione an amused look, obviously unsure of how to respond to her mother's pronouncement.

"Look, I'm sorry mom! It's just, most of my friends don't have access to Muggle transportation!"

"That hasn't stopped you," Sarah pointed out archly, then laughed and smiled. "Never mind. Would you like to stay for dinner, Skylee?"

"Thank you, Ma'am, I'd love to."

Dinner conversation was cheerful, though Hermione felt a bit embarrassed by her mother's subtle yet relentless pumping for information. She also felt a little guilty. Many of the things her mother asked sought to clarify magical matters that affected day to day life – things she should have been hearing from Hermione over the past few years.

Of course, Hermione was very open with her parents. She didn't try to keep things from them – it just didn't always occur to her that certain things needed to be explained. After her first month at Hogwarts, in which she had written home every other day bubbling with excitement, things had become common place to her. They ceased to surprise her, and thus ceased to strike her as something her parents NEEDED to know.

Somehow Sky made everything seem easy and accessible. He didn't treat her mother like an idiot for questioning the fundamentals of society, and for the first time Hermione wondered if he was pureblood or not. She had assumed he was because of his friendship with the mal Théas, but he acted like someone who worked closely with the non-magical world. How fascinating.

"And where do you go to school, Sky?"

"I don't go to school, Ma'am."

"You don't?" Sarah sounded scandalized, and privately Hermione agreed with her. "But education is extremely important!"

"Yes, Ma'am. When I was little I had a private tutor, but these days I usually study independently."

"What do you study?"

"History and linguistics."

"Magical history?" Sarah's interest was obviously piqued.

"Yes, Ma'am. Non-magical, too. My parents are archaeologists, and I help with their digs. I immerse myself entirely into the history and language of the culture we're studying, both magical and non-magical."

"Fascinating!"

After a few more leading questions about Sky's life, Sarah guided the conversation toward magical life in modern times, and how it affected her daughter. When they weren't playing 20 questions, Hermione made herself a lively presence in their conversation. It was fun – her mother especially seemed to enjoy the interaction. Hermione reminded herself to host a party at her house over the summer.

Eventually the topic of politics came up, much to Hermione's dismay. She continued to keep her parent's mostly uninformed about the current unrest in the Wizarding World. They knew there HAD been a Dark Lord who tried to kill everyone not of pure blood, but she hadn't said anything about the fact that his followers were becoming active again. She didn't want them to worry.

Luckily Sky was far less informed about current history than about ancient history. There was some vague talk around the prejudice against muggleborns, but nothing was said about the Death Eaters. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief.

"I noticed your house isn't warded," Sky said in a sudden lull in conversation. "That's inviting trouble these days, you know."

Hermione winced. "Oh, I don't know about that," she hedged, desperately trying to communicate that she didn't want to talk about it with her mother. Sky frowned, but got the message and changed the subject.

When dinner was over, Sky drew Hermione aside as Sarah began clearing the table.

"Look, it's not my business, but even I know it is folly not to ward your house. Especially as a Muggleborn."

"I know," Hermione moaned. "It's just, the Ministry charges 15 galleons an hour for an 'Official Wardscrafter' to come. I can't afford that, and I don't want to tell my parents why they need to cough up that much money. I'll be of age next year."

"Why don't you ask one of your professors?"

"I have. McGonagall expressed sympathy and concern, and said my name would be added to the list of children who need wards on their homes."

"Have you asked Brie?" this question was pointed where the others had been polite. Hermione blushed.

"I don't want to bother him. He's so... I don't want to ask him to come so far out of his way, you know?"

"Look, it really needs to be done. If I had the power to do it for you, I would. I don't. Ask Brie. Call him."

"What, now?"

"Yeah. I'll provide moral support." Sky offered a comforting smile and Hermione nodded slowly. She would ask Brie for a favor. He would do it for her, because they were friends. She grabbed the phone off the hook and allowed Sky to dial Brie's number. She and Gabriel were friends. She could ask her friend for a favor. How hard was it to ask friends for favors? Friends helped their friends. Friends-

"Allo?"

Hermione jumped slightly at the knock on the front door. She glanced down at her watch, cursing slightly when she realized that she had been reading for the past three hours. That definitely had not been her intention. The plan had been to get the house tidied up a bit before her guests arrived, but oh well. Brie would just have to live with the fact that not everyone had a servant living in their house to clean up after them.

The knock came a second time, and Hermione hurried toward the door. "Just a moment!" she called as she slid open the bolt on the door.

Two men in business suits stood on her porch.

"Oh," she stammered, looking between them in surprise. Not who she'd been expecting. "Hello. Can I help you?"

"Are you Hermione Granger?" the man on the left inquired in a polite tone of voice.

Hermione shifted nervously, muscles tensing as her fight or flight instincts began kicking in. The only thing keeping her from slamming the door in their faces was their apparent ease in their Muggle attire. No Death Eater she had ever heard of would appear so comfortable in a suit.

Besides, Brie had told her that he would come to set up her wards in exactly two minutes – even if they were Death Eaters, she could put up enough of a fight that Brie would be able to figure out what had happened. And, for some odd reason, she had absolutely no doubt that the other teenager would devote himself to keeping her safe if it came down to that. If these men meant to harm her, she would have backup soon.

"Yes," she responded, only hesitating slightly. "And you are?"

"Egan. My colleague is Lieutenant Rodriguez. The Lieutenant General sends his regrets that he could not make it himself, but wishes you to know that he considers your safety a priority. That's why we're here, ma'am."

"Yes?" she prompted, allowing a bit of tension to flow away. They were saying all the right things to put her at ease. She wasn't

prepared to let them into her house yet, especially without her wand in hand, but she was willing to hear them out and consider what they had to say.

"I'm a wards specialist, ma'am. You may contact the ASW-Canada for my credentials, though I assure you that the General only hires the best."

Hermione believed that. She couldn't imagine a mal Théa ever settling for even second best. If they were who they claimed to be.

"Please excuse me for a moment," she said, politely closing the door in their faces. She could still see them through the glass, standing at their ease on the porch. Taking a deep breath she retreated into the hall to verify their story.

"Pick up," she muttered as the phone rang.

"Allo?"

"Hello! Brie, this is Hermione."

"Ah," he didn't sound at all surprised. In fact, he sounded amused. "I thought you might call. Good for you—I am pleased that you take your own safety seriously. Egan and Rodriguez are from me; they'll do a better job with your security than I could."

Hermione raised her eyebrows at this admission that he couldn't do everything better than everyone else. Apparently there was one modest bone in his body. She wouldn't hold out hope for a second.

After a few lines of small talk, she hung up and returned to the door. The two men hadn't moved a muscle. It only took a few more minutes to set the entire process in motion. Somehow the two men seemed to fill the house with bustle. Magic thrummed around Egan as Rodriguez began coaching her on proper safety procedures in case of an attack. Four grueling hours later, the Granger home could have survived a nuclear bomb exploding on the roof with absolutely no effect.

Hermione sent each man home with a box of still warm Muggle-made cookies and her profuse thanks. They thanked her for the former and waved off the later. And just like that, it was over. Her

house was safe, her parents were none the wiser, and she was suddenly deeply in debt to Gabriel mal Théa.

She wasn't particularly comforted by that last point.

-Hogwarts-

Brie idly traced patterns on the smooth wood of the table as he listened to the Ancient Runes professor talk about the term project. He vaguely recalled hearing something about it before break, but he hadn't put much thought into it then. Now the professor was giving the specifications for the group project that they were supposed to have come up with ideas for over break.

At least it was going to be a group project. His eyes flicked around the circular table, lingering on each member of his so-called pod. The group dynamics would prove far more interesting than the actual project, or so he suspected.

Hermione was taking careful notes – one of the reasons he wasn't bothering to do so – and looked altogether too excited. Not that he was surprised. From what Egan and Rodriguez reported, she had taken a copious amount of interest in their work as well. Add to that the time and effort she always put into her Potions homework, and she was almost as bad as Levi. Maybe he would kidnap her some weekend and take her on one of his training excursions.

Anya was taking notes as well, giving the professor her complete attention. Why was it that someone as unscholarly as Brie had managed to become best friends with three of the smartest, most devoted students in the school? It was food for his thoughts. He wasn't even half as smart as any of them, though at least he could hold his own during the practicals.

Blaise, like Brie, was paying attention without bothering to take notes. The girls liked him well enough that, when he asked, they were willing to let him copy their notes. The two boys exchanged a glance and Blaise rolled his eyes slightly at their fifth companion.

From a distance Draco appeared to be taking notes, but the vacant look in his eyes and the strange doodles on his parchment indicated otherwise. There were dark circles under the eyes of the blond Slytherin that not even pick-me-up spells could alleviate. Brie didn't

much care for the other aristocrat, but he was still curious what was causing this uncharacteristic slump.

It had been a busy break for his Lord Uncle's social club, and Lucius Malfoy was an elite member. Was he preparing his son to follow in his footsteps? It was a distinct possibility, and Brie was seized with a strange desire to prevent it from happening.

Brie frowned to himself. He would need to explore this emotion in depth when he had the time. It was alien to him to help someone purely from the goodness of his heart, and he doubted that the Slytherin would give him any thanks for his concern. Finally he decided to dismiss it for the moment. He would consider it later. For now he needed to begin consulting with his group about this stupid project.

"I was thinking that it would be fascinating to research the use of runes in the old ritualistic magics," Hermione announced, looking around the group. Her eyes seemed to skip over Malfoy as if he wasn't there, focusing on Anya instead. After all, it would no doubt be the two girls who seized control of the group and guided them all to a good grade.

"Perhaps non-Latin based rituals," Anya suggested, sounding intrigued.

"What about Blood rituals?" Blaise threw in, teeth flashing white against his dark skin as he grinned.

"Isn't that Dark Magic?" Hermione asked hesitantly. The other four people at the table smirked at her.

"It is," Brie agreed nonchalantly. "But it's hardly illegal to research."

"Unless the mu-Muggleborn is afraid of a little real magic," Malfoy sneered, though his eyes darted toward Brie with his near slip. Brie gave him a predatory smile and Malfoy shut his mouth.

"No," Hermione snapped. "We'll research non-Latin based Blood rituals if that's what everyone wants."

"Lovely," Blaise looked pleased with himself, leaning back in his chair. "This should prove... enlightening." The look he gave Brie was

not reassuring, and for the first time Brie stopped to consider the ramifications of studying this particular subject.

Such as the fact that he was a living example of a non-Latin based Blood ritual.

The words 'oh crap' seemed strangely appropriate.

A week sped past. Then two, and suddenly school had been back in session for a month. Brie wasn't quite sure how it happened, but he knew he'd spent an absolutely ungodly amount of time in the Library. The girls had decided to push the envelope with the project for Ancient Runes, and instead of waiting until the end of the term like everyone else, they were insisting that they get the work done now.

Even worse than spending time in the Library was the fact that Brie was actually doing some of the research. He had gotten used to hanging out there with Levi, but he was usually reading military history or Salazar's journal or something equally interesting. Now, however...

"That's it," Brie announced, closing the book with a satisfying thud and standing. "We're taking a break. Get your brooms and meet me on the Quidditch pitch in five minutes."

Four faces stared at him blankly, but he crossed his arms and glared balefully back.

"Brie," Hermione sighed.

"Hermione," he shot back, before she could scold him. "If you really must continue working on this project, then bring it up as a conversation piece. Outdoors. In the air. We've been at this for a month, and if I spend another minute cooped up in this Shiva forsaken dust trap then I cannot be held responsible for my actions."

"He has a point," Draco's expression was sour at being forced to agree with Brie. "This is getting ridiculous, Granger."

"It isn't her fault," Anya snapped, glaring at the blond. "This project is worth much of our grade, and is proving quite fascinating." She held her fierce expression for a moment, then relented. "Though I, too, could use some air."

"Very well." Blaise stood up and slung his bag over his shoulder. "No one will touch our table. Lets go fly."

Hermione wasn't quite sure what had happened since she had come back from break. All she knew was that it involved a research project on an obscure topic and a lot of time spent in the Library with people she wasn't sure she liked.

Oh, she liked Anya well enough, and Brie was practically a friend – but spending her time with Slytherins? With Draco Malfoy? She didn't know how that had happened.

And if just working on a project together wasn't bad enough, now she was on a broom, playing catch with two Slytherins. Could life get much stranger? As soon as she thought the words, she grimaced. Now she had gone and jinxed herself.

Sure enough, as she flew outside the arena to fetch their stray ball, she saw Professor Black talking heatedly with... Was that Professor Lupin? What was he doing back at Hogwarts? Curiosity had always been one of Hermione's weaknesses, and she gave into it now with little resistance.

A quick disillusionment spell allowed her to fly close enough to hear their words, and what they had to say was well worth the risk. Five minutes later she rejoined her peers, wide eyed and empty handed.

"Granger! What took you so long?" Blaise called as she approached. "And where's the ball?"

"I... I couldn't find it," she told them, shrugging and trying to smile. "Let's go back in." She looked around nervously. "Now. Please?"

"Is something wrong?" Anya flew closer, a look of genuine concern on her face.

Hermione shrugged. How did you tell someone that you had just overheard a private conversation regarding the current state of You-Know-Who's amassing army? Or that the savior of your world was apparently not stashed safely away as most people believed. That he was, in fact, missing and presumed dead by those who knew the truth?

"I'm cold," she said instead. "And it'll be getting dark soon. Let's take a break from the project for the rest of the night."

Shrugging, Brie led the decent to the field and the five headed back toward the castle.

Brie looked down at the letter in confusion. Why would Shay need him today? In the middle of the week? Not that Brie minded skipping school, of course – it just struck him as a little odd, considering the rules at Hogwarts didn't really allow this sort of thing. Still, there was nothing he could do but show the letter to the Headmaster.

Politely excusing himself from the Gryffindors, he walked purposefully up to the Head Table. Several of the professors were watching him, and Snape looked almost irritated. Not that he ever didn't look irritated – it was just that he seemed irritated with Brie, which was fairly unusual. Dumbledore smiled inanely at his approach.

"Hello my boy," he greeted jovially. Brie's eyes narrowed slightly at the endearment, but he decided not to pursue it at the moment. He had more important things to worry about than one old man taking liberties with his name.

"Headmaster. May I speak with your privately?"

"Certainly," the Headmaster's eyes sparkled, and he stood immediately. Brie wondered what it was the old man thought the conversation was going to be about.

Instead of walking all the way to the Headmaster's office, Brie opened the door to the first old classroom they came across. Dumbledore hid his surprise well and simply stepped into the room and sat at the teacher's desk. Brie was impressed at the old man's adaptability, but made sure not to show it.

"Have a seat," the Headmaster waved his wand and one of the student chairs trotted over like an obedient dog. Brie remained standing, but the Headmaster didn't lose his smile.

"Severus never sits down, either," he confided genially. "So what can I do for you?"

Brie wordlessly handed over Shay's letter, face blank and eyes hard. As the Headmaster read the letter, Brie internally prepared for battle. He would go to Shay today.

"Well, everything appears to be in order," the Headmaster smiled and handed the letter back. Brie hid his surprise well, but he had been caught off balance. He'd been all set for verbal warfare, which was why he had requested a private meeting – he hadn't expected to be calmly dismissed.

He took the letter back after a moment's pause.

"I will be back by tomorrow morning," Brie said, just in case there was any chance the Headmaster hadn't just given his permission.

"Very good. I will let your professors know."

Brie stood silently for another moment, regarding the Headmaster curiously. Finally he turned around and left. There was definitely more to that man than met the eye, and it was probably in his best interest to find out what it was.

-France-

Shay's office was highly indicative of the sort of man the Parisian Butcher was. The room was small enough to be intimate, but large enough to be intimidating and to contain everything he felt he needed close at hand. A huge leather-topped mahogany desk dominated the room. Three of four walls were lined in floor to ceiling shelves, filled with books on everything from ancient battles to torture methods to dodging taxes. (There was even a book of fairy tales stuck in there somewhere from when Brie had been a child.) The fourth wall was taken up by a huge stain-glass window that kept the Butcher artistically backlit.

Shay himself looked the same as he had the day he'd met Brie over a decade ago. There were a few more lines on his face and a bit of grey at his temples, but he was still active and strong, able to take on men half his age with ease. Even Brie could only win one fight in four, though that might change once he hit his majority.

Now he sat at his desk, riffling through a stack of paper. His hair was tied back in the same style his nephew favored, and like his nephew he was wearing fatigues. He didn't look up as Brie came in and stood at attention, but Brie hadn't expected him to. The teen waited patiently for his uncle to finish what he'd been doing. Shay would get to him when he got to him, and not a moment sooner.

"You're late."

"Yes sir," Brie agreed, despite knowing there hadn't been a specified time. Shay picked up a stack of papers and tapped them against his desk to even them. Brie continued to stand at attention.

"Have you heard from your friend lately? That charming redheaded child."

"Last week, sir. He and his parents are currently in Iceland."

"Ah. Such a treasure. Pity he won't marry into the family. He sent me an interesting letter this morning."

Brie's interest was immediately piqued. It wasn't unheard of for Sky to send 'interesting letters' to Shay, but it was rare. Usually news filtered through Brie first, and he was the one to pass it along if necessary. When it went to Shay first, it meant that it was urgent and official. How interesting.

"Sir?" he prompted.

"Apparently young Master Lee has been translating a scroll that tells of an ancient ritual that can be used to destroy something that the author refers to as 'crystal heart stones.' In context, your friend seems to believe he's found the answer to our dilemma of what to do with those little fragments of Dark Lord we keep in the basement."

Brie's eyes widened slightly. They had been trying to figure out how to safely destroy the Horcruxes for years. Finding them had sadly proved to be the easy part – Voldemort's flair for the dramatic had gotten the better of him, and he'd made fairly predictable choices. The only thing they hadn't been able to find was Slytherin's locket, but they knew who had it last and it was only a matter of time before they got their hands on that, too.

Destroying them had proven somewhat more difficult, as three corpses could attest.

If Sky had really found a safe way to dispose of the Horcruxes, then they would be able to accelerate their plan. Brie gave his uncle a slow smile, and Shay smirked back.

"How shall we proceed, sir?"

"With caution," Shay shrugged. "I have two men down in the dungeon right now. I believe I'll give one the option of winning his freedom."

Serge Rose wasn't exactly sure what he'd done to piss the Butcher off, but he was certainly regretting it now. In fact, he was regretting a lot of things right now. Not saying goodbye to his wife when he'd left for work was high on his list – right below kicking himself for agreeing to take the pictures in the first place. At least, he assumed the pictures had something to do with his current situation. After all, why else would a small time photographer end up in the luxuriously dank, dark dungeons of the infamous Parisian Butcher? Whose identity Serge could unequivocally confirm was indeed Akshay Lord mal Théa.

Not that that piece of information was very comforting, of course.

He'd been here for three days, and he'd yet to see another human being. Someone left food for him every morning and every night, his privy kept itself magically clean, and he had a warm blanket and a thin mattress – so it wasn't as bad as it could be.

It was still a dungeon, though, and he was still being held prisoner against his will.

The faint sound of approaching voices had Serge scrambling to his feet. Was someone coming for him? Would he finally meet his captor face to face? Was he about to die? He really hoped it was one of the former and not the later – though he wasn't sure he wanted to meet the Butcher face to face. The rumors were rather off putting, to say the least.

The cell door opened and Serge squinted at the two figures in the door. He knew the Butcher on sight, having seen him briefly when he was first taken captive. The younger man he didn't recognize, but one look at the eyes told him everything he needed to know.

"The Archangel," he breathed, eyes wide with fright. The Butcher laughed, a soft, sinister sound.

"Your reputation precedes you, son. How ironic that, in my dungeon, it is your name he whispers in fear."

"If only because he cannot bring himself to utter a name so terrible as your own, Lord General," the Archangel replied dryly.

"Of course. He stares at us with cow's eyes, even now wondering which of us he ought to be throwing himself at, begging for forgiveness for a crime he is probably not aware he committed."

"Neither of us are known for forgiveness."

"Yes, but you are known to show mercy at times."

"To the innocent. This man hardly qualifies."

"Even though you acknowledge the fact that he is probably unaware of why he is our... guest?"

"Ignorance is not innocence."

Serge watched the two converse with rising terror. They were so calm, so cold – he didn't doubt for an instant that he was only alive because they hadn't gotten around to killing him yet. It was only a matter of time, though. He opened his mouth to try and speak, but nothing came out. The Butcher laughed again.

"Look, he thinks to speak without leave."

"Not wise," the Archangel informed Serge chidingly. "Recruits are punished for lesser offenses, and we like them."

Serge gulped slightly and clamped his mouth shut, much to the Butcher's amusement.

"What do you think, my son? Will he do?"

"Oh yes. He will do quite well. Quite well indeed. Would you like to destroy the Dark Lord, Mr. Rose?"

Chapter 26: Tension

Brie startled awake with a gasp. He was sweating profusely, with the strange sensation of being freezing hot. Magic rolled wild and untamed around him, thick and sickly sweet. He struggled to breathe, but inhaling it churned his stomach.

He lurched to his feet and stumbled to the bathroom, retching violently into the toilet as soon as he reached it. He emptied his stomach and continued to dry heave, his entire body shaking in reaction.

It was too warm.

He pulled off his shirt, gasping as his sweat-soaked skin made contact with the chill air. He took a few deep breaths, trying to calm down. After a minute he stood, bracing himself against the cool tiles of the wall. He stumbled to the sink and used his hands to rinse out his mouth. He splashed cold water across his face, then used his discarded shirt as a towel.

He cursed slightly as a glance in the mirror showed that his glamours had shattered. It would take days to build them up as strong as they had been, and he doubted he would be given that much time before the next attack.

Exhausted, he stood with his head down, arms braced against the sink, trembling as he mentally reviewed his Occlumency barriers. They were barely holding. He had not suffered so pervasive a mental attack since Shay had first taught him the art. That Voldemort had come so close to shattering his mental walls frightened him more than he cared to admit, even to himself.

"Harry Potter is dead," he muttered in a half-hearted attempt to convince himself. "There is no Potter here. Only me. Only me."

Neville stared up at the canopy of his bed. In the dim light, the curtains appeared brown and heavy, more like stone than cloth. He wondered what had woken him up at - he checked his clock - 3 am.

There were no sounds in the dorm – even Seamus was sleeping quietly. Maybe that was it, Neville thought. Everything was too quiet. The air was too heavy. It felt as though Crookshanks was sitting on his chest, keeping him from breathing deeply. He checked to make sure this wasn't the case.

Still, there was something cloying about the air tonight. A sickly sweetness like rotten fruit lingered in their dorm, making him feel queasy. Almost as soon as he noticed it, the feeling intensified until Neville felt sticky with it.

He was considering getting up to take a shower – anything for relief – when Gabriel's curtains were ripped open.

Neville stared as the other teen stumbled into the bathroom. The sound of retching pulled him to his feet and he padded quietly over to the door of the bathroom. He paused, not quite willing to intrude. He doubted the other boy would take kindly to being seen vulnerable.

As he watched Gabriel dry heave, he noticed that the sweetness was leaving the room. Had it made Gabriel sick? It had surely nauseated Neville enough. Or was it somehow the result of Gabriel's sickness? Neville had seen plenty of magical ailments during his visits with his parents, and some of them had strange scents attached to them.

His train of thought was abruptly derailed when Gabriel pulled off his shirt and stood, leaning heavily on the bathroom wall. His back was to the door and Neville had to stuff his fist in his mouth to keep from making a sound. His friend's back was a lattice of scars, and very few looked like the sort he might have picked up during his stint as the Archangel. They looked like someone had taken a heavy belt to his back.

He remembered back to their conversation about parents all those years ago, wondering what had been left out. No wonder Ms Rai had adopted him. Neville was hardly a fan of the mal Théas, but he knew that they would never even dream of hurting a child of their family.

So who was Gabriel, really? Neville had always assumed that his parents had been mal Théas, but seeing him now...

Then Gabriel stumbled to the sink, and Neville could see him in the mirror. He retreated further into the shadows by the door. If Gabriel knew he'd been seen like this... Neville wasn't willing to take his chances as Augusta's grandson. He retreated to his bed and pulled the covers up to his chin, waiting until he heard the shower turn on before he relaxed.

It was a long time before sleep reclaimed him that night.

Brie went to Potions already in a bad mood. When Snape spent the period glaring balefully at him, his mood did not improve. What was the man's problem? Last Brie checked, he hadn't done anything worth the man's ire. Sure he'd skipped classes yesterday, but he was pretty sure that Snape had been pissed off before that.

When class was finally dismissed, he waved Blaise and Hermione to go on without him. He waited impatiently for the room to empty, then walked up to the professor. Snape didn't look up from grading papers. After a moment of watching the man give all the 2nd year Gryffindors failing marks, Brie decided he was fed up with nonsense. He'd had a horrible night that not even an hour long shower had been able to redeem. He was grouchy, mentally sore, and even more paranoid than usual.

"(What crawled up your ass and died?)" he inquired in Hindi.

Snape looked up with a sneer. "Speak English," he snapped. He added something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like 'bloody foreigners,' which only served to increase Brie's own irritation.

"What's your problem? Professor."

"My problem?" Snape repeated with a glare, "my problem is that I gave you a certain text over four months ago, and I still have not heard anything. I have not even been charged a translation fee. I understand the translation process should have taken a third of that time."

Brie was tempted to roll his eyes, but restrained himself. He was irritated, yes, but not irritated enough to want this man as an enemy. Snape was far more valuable as an ally, or at least as a neutral party.

"My cousin has been busy," he said instead. "Your translation is not the sole focus of her life."

He was purposefully vague about who was doing the work – no matter which mal Théa governed the negotiations over a Parseltongue translation, they always referred to the translator as 'my cousin.' Brie found it worked as well for him as any of his other relatives, and he threw in the feminine pronoun for his own amusement.

"You may write to my uncle for an update on my cousin's progress. I'm sure he would be happy to assist such a valued member of his Social Club."

Snape's expression turned from dark to murderous. "Get out," he hissed, seething. Brie readily complied, a malicious little smile curling his lips.

Hermione was laughing as she preceded Brie through the portrait hole and back into their common room. She had almost stopped being surprised by his unexpected humor, but every once in awhile it still caught her off guard. Sometimes it was nice to be surprised, she decided. She wanted to be surprised more often.

Ginny had risen as Hermione stepped through the entrance, and now she stood, loose limbed, face tight. Neville still sat on the couch where the two had been working on homework together. He didn't look up from his parchment, though he carefully set down his quill. Ron and Seamus fell silent where they sat on the floor with a chessboard, and Dean straightened in his chair.

Hermione's laughter died on her lips at the tense, silent tableau. She could feel Brie tensing behind her, and she wondered whether he was preparing to attack.

"Hello, Hermione." Ginny's voice wavered slightly, betraying her nerves.

Hermione swallowed, looked between her friends, then looked around the rest of the common room. It had fallen quiet, though everyone appeared engrossed in their own business. At least they were being given a vestige of privacy.

"Hello, Ginny. Neville, Dean, Seamus. Ron." She gave each a friendly nod, trying not to look completely off balance. "Is, um... is something the matter?"

"Oh, I don't know," Ginny's voice rose slightly. "I didn't think so, but then I realized that the only time I ever see my best friend anymore is at dinner. So I thought 'oh! That's nothing – she's just busy with school.' But then I realized that when I see my best friend at dinner, it isn't a chummy 'sitting next to me' sort of seeing. It's a 'watching her across the room at a different table' sort of seeing. So you tell me, Hermione. Is something the matter?"

Ginny's voice was shrill by the end, and she looked as though she was fighting tears. Hermione felt like she'd been slapped.

"I-I've spent time with you!" she protested, hands clutching the straps of her book bag. "In the common room! Doing homework, Ginny, just like you and Nev."

"Sure." Ginny's voice had returned to a normal volume, though she didn't sound any happier. "Sure, you spend time in the same physical space with us. Geez, how stupid of me. Of course you spend time with us. Never mind that you're usually stuck in big books or talking to your new best friend – no, of course your right. You're always right. And never mind that you'd rather spend time with Slytherins – with Malfoy – then spend time with us."

Hermione opened her mouth, but she couldn't think of a defense. She hadn't been prepared for this attack. Oh, she'd wondered when Ron would get on her case about the Slytherin thing, but she hadn't expected Ginny to come at her with neglect. Had Ron put her up to this? Before she could make her own accusations, Ginny held up a forestalling hand.

"Don't. Hermione, just... just don't. I know you've got that stupid project that 'forces' you to spend all your time in the Library. I don't want to hear about it. When I first met you, I knew that school was always going to come first in your life. That's what I love about you, remember? You're dedicated. You're hardworking."

Now they were both crying. Hermione hugged herself while the anger seemed to drain out of the redhead. The tenseness remained.

"Hermione, I'm not your boss. I can't tell you what to do or who to hang out with. If you're making new friends, that's okay. I'm happy for you. I just don't want you to forget your old friends. I can't make you choose them or me – and I wouldn't want to try, because at this point you might pick them, and I don't want to lose you."

They stood there for another moment, then Ginny turned and disappeared into her dorm. Hermione didn't wait to talk to the boys. Dropping her book bag by the couch, she rushed after her redheaded friend and disappeared up the stairs.

Albus sighed and looked up from the letter. He was getting tired of seeing this man's handwriting, and he wondered why he had been crazy enough to agree to allow a mal Théa into his school. Young Leverett Defayne was a good boy, at least, but the rest of that family... Well, he'd just as soon they kept themselves in France.

At least this was a letter he would have been given even without Gabriel's presence at Hogwarts. The mal Théa family had the only known Parseltongue this century other than the Dark Lord, and Albus would rather gamble on a mal Théa than Voldemort when it came to the personal belongings of Salazar Slytherin.

"Well?" Severus asked with a scowl. "Are you going to continue to allow these people to walk all over us?"

Albus stroked his beard, considering the situation. "That he did not send it here with his nephew after break indicates that it was only recently finished or that he feels it necessary to meet with you in person, in which case-

"In which case a meeting at the Hogshead would suffice," Severus grumbled. Albus shook his head.

"No, no, that would be too public. Coming here would give the transaction a vestige of legitimacy."

It was Severus's turn to shake his head in disagreement, though he kept silent. Albus sighed.

"You know this man – and his associates – better than I do, Severus. If you believe it is best that he does not come to Hogwarts, then I

shall refuse him. Otherwise, you have my permission to do whatever is necessary to secure that translation, including offering the hospitality of this school to Akshay mal Théa."

Severus was silent, but Albus could tell that he was pleased by the Headmaster's gesture of trust. They finished their tea and Severus stood to leave.

"Thank you, Headmaster."

"Thank you my boy – this is an important step toward the end of the war, once and for all."

Severus hesitated. "What about the prophecy?"

"We have the Other. He will have to do. Good evening, Severus."

"I... Good evening, Albus."

Defense began with a bang, courtesy of Dean and Seamus.

Brie usually enjoyed the class, finding the antics of his classmates and his professor amusing enough to make up for what he considered dull coursework. Of course, it also helped that he had a very good reason for trying to make friends with the easy-going ex-con.

At the moment they were brainstorming shield spells with their partners. As usual, he was sitting next to Hermione. To his delight, though not to his surprise, she was keeping pace with him in naming off charms and wards. Some he had never heard of and more were those he tended to disregard as impractical during battle, but they were valid shields nonetheless. As Hermione pointed out, not all shields were meant to be used by combatants. What about the mediwitch who had to tend the wounded on a battlefield? She needed a permanent shield of a different sort. What about the innocent bystander? He needed a different type of shield as well. It was an interesting exercise, and he found himself a more active participant than normal. His attentiveness was rewarded with House points and the pleased smiles of Professor Black.

As the period ended, Black beckoned him over. The professor was grinning at him as the room emptied, so Brie was fairly certain he wasn't about to be punished.

"Your knowledge is impressive," Black remarked, "when you deign to share it. Have you considered participating more often?"

"Yes," Brie responded, a little smile tugging on his lips. He honestly liked this man who, in another life, had been his godfather. "The thought had crossed my mind."

Black's laugh was harsh, like the bark of a big dog. "Smart, kid. Anyways, the Headmaster asked me to organize a dueling club. I need an assistant. You would be expected to spend time making lesson plans and helping me teach your peers how to duel. I want to meet Tuesday nights for now, but that might change. What do you say?"

Brie's first instinct was to say a great, resounding NO. He did not want to waste his time trying to teach little kids how to cast a proper disarming spell. Never mind that he had been younger than they when his own lessons began...

His second thought, however, was that this was the opportunity he'd been waiting for. He wanted Black to trust him, and for that, he needed to spend time with the professor – and here was Black, giving him the opportunity with no effort on his part!

"You don't have to answer now," Black reassured him as he hesitated.

Brie shook his head. This was too good an opportunity to pass up. He had to do it.

"Thank you for your offer, Professor. With a few conditions, I would be happy to assist you."

"Like what?" the man's curiosity – and a slight wariness – was written across his face like an open book. Brie searched his mind for some conditions to offer.

"First, that I be allowed to work with both advanced and beginner students."

"Yes," Black agreed quickly, as Brie had expected him to.

"Second, that along with stylized dueling, the students learn real fighting."

"Ok," Black nodded slowly, obviously seeing the sense in that, even if the Ministry's DADA curriculum could not.

"Third," Brie paused as an idea tugged at the edge of his mind. He continued without thinking on it too closely. "I want to take the more promising students on a weekend training expedition." It had been too long since he had company while training. While he enjoyed the solitude, it was nice to have company every once in awhile.

"We'll have to discuss that one in detail," Black shrugged. "I'll agree to the general principle, but I can't make any promises."

Brie nodded – that was more than fair on the professor's part. If it fell through, oh well. That wasn't the condition he was dead set on being granted. In fact, he didn't really care about anything he'd said so far. He'd proposed them as a way to test the water and because the professor would be expecting him to try and negotiate for his own benefit. The last condition was the only one that he cared about.

"And - I want to teach them about the Dark Arts."

Chapter 27: To Sleep, Perchance to Dream

"I can't believe he asked me that! What was he thinking? What did he think I'd say? Yes? Do I come off as that much of a pushover?"

"Are those rhetorical questions?" Sirius paused his furious pacing and turned to face Minerva.

"No," he answered, running his hand through his hair. "Well, maybe the last one," he amended at the other professor's raised eyebrow. "But seriously – no pun intended – I don't get this kid. One minute he's reminding me of my best friends, and the next he's having psychotic breaks! First the boggart, now this – this – this madness! Honestly, Dark Arts? He might as well have asked me politely if he could train my students to be good little Death Eaters!"

"Now Sirius, don't you think that's going a little far?"

"A little far? A little far? Minerva, what part of he wants to train them in the Dark Arts didn't you understand?"

There was a slightly hysterical edge to Sirius's voice, and Minerva heaved an inward sigh. What was it about the mal Théa boy that got the adults around him so worked up? Last semester she had been the one in need of a good stiff drink every time she dealt with him. Honestly she was a little surprised that it was Sirius who was next to fall victim to the boy – they had seemed to get along better than average, or at least Sirius seemed to understand the child a bit better than his peers. Only Severus had a consistently better relationship with the mal Théa boy, and even that had seemed strained recently.

"Well, are you sure he wants to train them in the Dark Arts? From what you first said, it sounded to me as though he were more interested in teaching them about the subject. And you have to admit, Sirius, that there is some merit to that idea."

"I don't have to admit anything," he grumbled, though he seemed to be calming down. "The Dark Lord is rising, Minerva. Every day that we sit here, he gains ground. Soon he'll have enough power to make a bid on Hogwarts. If we open the students to the hidden promises of the Dark Arts... Who knows what will happen then. Without Harry, without the prophecy, we have nothing to fall back on

except the students in this school. You know the lure of the Dark Arts as well as I do. I don't doubt the children's hearts, but anyone can be seduced by power – especially the young."

"Sometimes you need to fight fire with fire. They deserve to know what to expect. How can a child, an innocent who has never even seen death, understand the true threat that He Who Must Not Be Named poses to our world unless we provide them with the context necessary to grasp the reality of the situation? Some of these children have lost their entire families to a madness that they cannot begin to understand. Maybe mal Théa has a point. Maybe we need to teach them how this is possible, how something that was once human could become such a monster. Perhaps they need to feel that lure. The point isn't to let them become corrupted, the point is to let them come to terms with corruption in a relatively safe environment."

Sirius stood with his back to her, one hand massaging his temple. In the ensuing silence, Minerva wondered about her passionate little speech. What had motivated her outburst? Certainly not fear... Right? Fear alone wouldn't cause her to violate her principles and promote the theft of innocence by teaching children about adult matters, of that much she was certain. But could it alter her perceptions enough to allow a horrible lapse in her judgment?

No, she decided. Yes, she was afraid. Yes, the thought of what might become of her world kept her up late into the night. But it was not enough to cause her to put her children into any sort of danger, physical or otherwise. Satisfied that she was thinking clearly, she turned her attention outward once more.

Sirius had resumed his pacing, though it was less frantic now, and somehow more thoughtful. He was considering her words, weighing them against his own conscience. She wondered whether she had the right to try and tip the scales further.

"When I was young, I lived and breathed the Dark Arts."

The word cut through her inwardly spiraling thoughts, dragging her back to the present once more. She nodded, but said nothing, interested in what conclusion her former student had reached.

"It used to give me nightmares. I don't know why I was so different from the rest of my family. My mother always said it was because I was a coward and an idiot. She said it was a pity that I had magic, because at least if I was a Squib, she could have killed me at birth and been done with it."

Minerva grimaced. She'd always found Mrs. Black to be an unpleasant woman, and this only further confirmed her impressions. Imagine telling your own child that you wished him dead.

"For whatever reason, through whatever divine intervention, I didn't turn out like Reggie, steeped in the Dark Arts. What made me so different? Was it something inherent in our characters? Was I somehow inherently better than my brother? Or was he, the model son, somehow inherently better than me?"

He was silent for a moment, lost in thought. Minerva didn't push him. This story couldn't be rushed. She wondered at him telling her now, rather than during his years in her House. Despite being one of her favorite students, he had never confided in her about his home life, though she had offered a listening ear more than once. Even after rejecting his family he remained tight lipped on the subject. It felt almost cathartic to be hearing it now.

"I suppose I object so strongly to this because I fear the Dark Arts, Minerva, and not in the normal way. I've seen what they can do, but that no longer keeps me up at night. No, I'm terrified of what they do to you inside, of the way they scramble you up until you lose yourself. I saw it happen to Reggie."

"But it didn't happen to you," Minerva gently pointed out when he paused to draw a shuddering breath.

"No," he agreed bitterly. "No, I escaped that particular fate. But what gives me the right to expose children, impressionable young minds, to the horrors that killed my baby brother? I'm not deluded enough to think that I can both expose them to the Dark Arts and shield them from it. It's one or the other, Minerva. What gives me the right to make that choice?"

"Voldemort," she responded immediately, wincing even as she forced the name through clenched teeth. She watched Sirius flinch in response.

"It's noble of you to speak of shielding the children from the horror outside of school, but please remember – the last time you came through a war, you were the child. Tell me, Mr. Black, did you stay innocent?"

He had no response for that.

"Trust me, Sirius, these children are going to lose their innocence long before this is over. Oh, some will come out relatively unscathed, but this generation will carry the burden of war even more heavily than yours. We have the right to choose because we are the ones who understand the choice. It is not a happy choice, and it is not an easy one, but it is our reality."

Minerva sighed, rubbing her face tiredly. "Open yourself to the possibility, Sirius. We have a chance to train these children, to teach them survival skills that they desperately need. The time for living with our heads in the sand is over. We are at war. Let's give our side a fighting chance."

Brie started violently awake for the third night in a row. After catching his breath, he lay back, knowing that getting up was the best choice, but somehow unwilling to give up his bed again.

He'd been raised to never give in, but wasn't that exactly what he was doing? Giving in to the dreams or mental attacks or whatever they were? He certainly wasn't fighting back. He was barely holding his own, and it was only three nights.

Knowing his luck, it would get worse before it got better. Assuming it got better.

He glanced at his headboard, where he kept a small stash of Dreamless Sleep. If it was only dreams that woke him up, this would allow him to get some much needed rest. If it was an attack... He didn't relish the thought of being trapped dreamlessly. Dreams always had a purpose, whether they served as a defensive mechanism or a subconscious guide. Removing that subconscious refuge would leave him completely vulnerable.

With a muttered oath, Brie rolled out of bed and stalked to the bathroom. Stepping under a hot stream of water he reminded

himself to send a letter to Aunt Genevieve. The woman was the most skilled Occlumens he knew – if anyone could tell him how to proceed, it would be her.

Path chosen, he retreated into the soothing mental silence of meditation.

Neville woke up around 4 am to the sound of the dorm shower turning off. Again? He wondered what was going on with Gabriel. The boy had been even worse tempered than usual yesterday – if he'd been sick again tonight, what would he be like today?

Neville listened to him get dressed and leave the dorm. Had anyone else noticed the boy's odd behavior? He didn't think so.

Hermione was the only other one who might notice a difference, but she had spent all of yesterday with Ginny and himself, anxious to repair their friendship before any more damage could be done. That, paired with his own reluctance to break Gabriel's trust, made him reluctant to ask her.

He would wait to see if she mentioned it first – and she would probably say something if she did notice. After all, he was the 'resident expert,' and so far all of Gabriel's apparent oddities had been explained away by his cultural upbringing. Hermione would check with him. Feeling better, his eyes drifted closed and in seconds he was soundly asleep once more.

Neville woke up again before everyone else. Gabriel was long gone, but the others snored blissfully on. He took a quick shower and threw on a more-or-less clean school robe, then headed to the common room to finish his Charms homework.

Not to his surprise, Hermione was already set up in front of the fire, books spread out on the floor in a four foot radius around her.

"Looks complicated," he said, watching her jump and turn, hand to her chest.

"Neville! You startled me!"

He gave her a sheepish smile, moving to settle on the couch behind his friend. She silently shifted some books to clear a spot.

"Ancient Runes?" he asked, craning his neck to see over her shoulder. "Used in Non-Latin Blood Rituals. Hermione.... Hermione, you must have half the restricted section here!" he gaped at the tomes with a sudden morbid fascination.

Hermione blushed crimson and kept her eyes on her notes. "It's all so fascinating, really, and it isn't illegal to research dark magic!" The last was said defensively, as though she was still trying to convince herself.

"The Slytherins are rubbing off on you," he teased half-heartedly. Hermione's shoulders slumped and her eyes filled with tears. She looked as though she were about to apologize or burst into tears, or possibly both, so Neville hurried on. "SO," he said, slightly louder than necessary. He coughed, cheeks pink, but continued in a more normal voice. "So this is what you've been working on. Tell me?"

Hesitantly at first, then with rising enthusiasm, Hermione began to explain the gist of her research. And with increasing fascination, Neville soaked in every word.

Chapter 28: Searching

My Dearest Aunt Genevieve,

I hope that this letter finds you in the best of health. I apologize for not being the diligent correspondent you deserve, but I promise to try harder in the future.

I have spent January in the throws of a school project on runes used in blood rituals. To tell the truth, I'm finding the project interesting in spite of myself. I actually find myself going to the Library of my own volition, if you can believe it! Did you know that there are only a handful of blood rituals in Latin? And we've only found two in a modern language. It's been immensely helpful to have Anya in our group, as her grasp of the old Slavonic has given us a solid formula to work from.

As I am sure you already know, this coming Wednesday is Valentine's Day. The Saturday following the holiday will be a Hogsmead trip, and I would very much appreciate it if you would coordinate with Beauxbatons and Headmaster Dumbledore to allow Fayette to accompany me to the village.

In other news, one of my Lord Uncle's old friends has been trying to contact me through a rather unorthodox channel. I am frankly growing weary of his constant intrusions, and I'm running out of ways to turn him away politely. As I know you are very skilled at political and social maneuvering, it occurred to me that you may be able to provide invaluable advice on how to deal with this situation.

Thank you for your discretion in this matter, and I look forward to further news from home.

With love,

Gabriel Reuben-Amrit mal Théa

Genevieve sighed as she folded up the letter from her nephew. They'd all known it would only be a matter of time before the Dark Lord was strong enough to begin searching out Harry Potter. It was the reason why everyone who knew her nephew's birth name had been made to learn Occlumency and why Brie himself had been taught to erect a veritable mental fortress. Still, and despite the

return of the Dark Lord in October, she had held out hope that Brie would have a peaceful second term at Hogwarts.

It obviously was not meant to be.

She carefully began preparing her ink and quill as she mentally reviewed the steps they would need to take now. She started with the easy parts first, jotting off polite letters to Madame Maxime and Monsieur Dumbledore as per Brie's request. She would spend more time drafting the complicated letters she would need to send to her son-in-law and to the other contacts she had cultivated for just this eventuality.

She hated calling in favors, but she had been a mal Théa for nearly her entire life. Protecting her family came before any other considerations.

Dear Gran,

Thank you very much for the sweets you sent. I shared them with Ginny and Hermione, who both said to say thanks. School is going well. Most of the classes are a challenge, but I can tell I'm learning lots. I haven't gotten any better at wordless spells, but other than that, I'm as good as the rest of the class in Defense. Professor Black is starting up a dueling club soon, and I've been thinking about joining. Do you think I should? I know you don't want me to be an Auror, but it would still be a chance to practice important skills.

I've been working with some of my friends on an extracurricular project. We're researching rituals, and I've been helping with information about herbs and plants. Do you think you could get me some Polyjuice potion? I know it's strictly regulated, but it would really help us out if you could make some inquiries for me.

I'm taking Ginny out for Valentine's Day. Yes, Gran, on a real date. Ginny said that I should make the plans, but I'll probably have Hermione tell me what Ginny wants. I don't want to mess this up!

Love,

Neville

Neville stared down at the little vial in his hand. He hadn't actually expected Gran to send it. She'd been proud of his work in Herbology and had been catering to his needs as a budding magical botanist, but this was outside the norm. Maybe she really did mean it when she said she trusted his judgment. His heart glowed with a moment in pride before plummeting as he remembered his reason for asking for the potion. If Gran knew what he was considering doing with it she would never trust him again.

The idea had occurred to him while listening to Hermione describe her research. She'd mentioned adoption rituals, though her own research had been focused on rituals that bestowed special knowledge on the caster. Neville's interest had been piqued. The mal Théas would have no qualms in carrying out an outlawed blood ritual if they'd decided that it was in the best interest of the family. Added to his new suspicion that Gabriel had not, in fact, been born a mal Théa, the information had festered in his mind until a theory had been born.

Neville knew he wasn't the cleverest boy in Hogwarts, but he prided himself on his understanding of certain basic principles of magic. Such as the inability of magic to completely erase a True Name and a True Face. If Gabriel had ever been anything but a mal Théa, adding his hair to the Polyjuice potion and drinking it would reveal who he had once been – because that was his True Face, and no mere adoption ritual could destroy that.

He stuck the potion in his headboard and turned to gather his school things. Did he even want to know the truth? It wasn't his business, and even though he'd been telling himself that he wanted to help Gabriel, he knew that any action he took was really to satisfy his own curiosity. He didn't like lying to other people and he flatly refused to lie to himself. If he did this thing, he would do it honestly.

For now, though, Neville headed to class. Now that he had the potential for instant answers, he was willing to sit on the information while he finished thinking his plan through. After all, discovering a secret hidden by the mal Théas was potentially very, very dangerous.

Hermione stared unabashedly as Brie poked at the fruit on his plate. He looked like hell slightly warmed over, and that was only if she was being kind. His hair hung limply around his shoulders, he had

dark circles under his bloodshot eyes, and he was actually slouching with his elbows on the table. Hermione was positively flabbergasted.

"Hey Brie, are you okay?" It probably wasn't a particularly welcome question, but it needed to be asked.

"Fine," he said shortly. When he didn't even bother to lift his head and glare, Hermione's concerns redoubled.

"I'm serious! You look awful," she added, glancing around to make sure no one else was paying attention to their conversation. She lowered her voice. "If this is about you-know-what..."

Now he summoned the energy to glare, and Hermione wasn't sure whether she should be amused or alarmed. His normally icy glare was empty and his left eye was twitching in a way that had nothing to do with emotion.

"Do you need your sister?" she asked, just to cover all the bases. Because if he said no, she was going to drag him to the infirmary and make him talk to Madame Pomfrey.

"I," he began, then stopped and took a deep breath. "I don't think so," he said after a minute. "I haven't been sleeping well, that's all. I wrote to my aunt already."

Not for the first time, Hermione wondered at the phenomena of being friends with Brie. Sometimes it felt like he hardly even tolerated her, but then he turned around and practically volunteered private information. And he'd already told her not to worry about the 'cost' of the wards his men had erected over break – he'd said he understood the importance of family, and was just glad that he could do something to keep hers safe. Even his glares recently had lacked any real venom. It was more like... More like he was glaring because it was the only way he knew to convey affection.

Hermione glared at Brie to convey her affection. "Well, mister, if your aunt doesn't do anything to help you by tomorrow night, I'm taking you to Madame Pomfrey. No buts," she added when it looked like he might protest. "We wouldn't want your fearsome reputation going down the drain due to a few nights' missed sleep."

He tried to smile at her, but the expression looked tortured and she had to stifle a giggle.

"And eat your breakfast," she ordered, just because she could.

Severus Snape was not pleased with the turn of events that brought him to stand at the gates of Hogwarts and await the arrival of a man he considered, at best, a dangerous ally. Akshay mal Théa, rumored warlord of France, was about the last person on earth that Severus would choose to invite to Hogwarts for a visit. But orders were orders, and the Order needed the translation of that journal. There had been rumors of secret knowledge in it that might help win the war once and for all – and if not, well, Severus could always present the journal to the Dark Lord as a gift. It would certainly win him a secure place in the inner circle.

With the man who was coming by for a visit.

Severus sighed and pulled out his pocket watch. Four minutes until mal Théa was late. He wondered whether the other man was dreading this meeting. Probably not, since he'd been the one to request it. Was there some other reason why he'd wanted to visit Hogwarts? Why hadn't he sent the book home with that damn nephew of his?

Before Severus could begin manufacturing plots that might bring mal Théa to Hogwarts, he caught sight of a figure walking up the road from the village. The brightly clad figure could not have been Akshay mal Théa, and for a few minutes Severus was stumped as to who might've picked his meeting time to come calling.

"Severus Snape?" The woman was short and far too eccentric looking to be called pretty. She had brown skin, spiky white hair, bare feet, and a bright pink sari. She had to be a mal Théa, and Severus felt a surge of relief. Her presence meant that his expected guest had decided to send a proxy. It was incredibly rude and Severus would find time to be insulted when he wasn't quite so pleased.

"At your service," he said, bowing his head before meeting her eyes. She grinned and held out her hand to shake.

"Sarai mal Théa," she announced, and Severus immediately forgave the insult of sending a proxy. "And I must say, it's a pleasure to finally meet you in person! I loved your article on bloodroot as a passive ingredient in protective potions. I'd always wondered why it was there, but I couldn't think of a good way to ascertain its purpose. Very creative and very thorough, Master Severus."

"Ms. Rai," he greeted with more enthusiasm than he could normally muster, "it is an honor. I'm delighted that you enjoyed my article as much as I enjoyed yours on the uses of sodium chloride. I would never have thought of it. Welcome to Hogwarts."

"Thanks," she said as they began walking toward the castle. "My brother would probably want me to extend an apology and make up an excuse for his absence, but since I was the one who slipped him a sleeping draught, it would be rather insincere."

Severus felt the corners of his mouth twitch upward of their own accord. "I won't ask any questions," he assured her. "Would you care for a tour of the castle before we get down to business?"

"How about a look at your labs?" she suggested.

"An excellent suggestion," said Severus, more pleased by the second. They quickly fell into a discussion about their mutual research as he led her down into the dungeons.

Chapter 29: Plots

Rai craned her neck to peer around the taller man's shoulder. When he noticed her difficulty, he shifted to give her a better view. She flashed him a quick smile before returning her attention to the softly bubbling cauldron. The smell was horrid, but exactly the right kind of horrid for a potion brewed with mandrake.

"Your creativity is as amazing in person as it is on paper," she said, shaking her head in bemused admiration. "Of course a mandrake base would stabilize the sage and quartz in a far-seeing potion! But who would have thought, what with its normal uses? Well, no matter. I want to peer-test this discovery."

"Thank you, Rai," Severus replied, covering the cauldron and wiping his hands off on a nearby rag. "I was hoping you would volunteer. I'll have to collect my notes and send them to you at a later date. For now, however, the brew should be left alone. Shall we take dinner here or in the Great Hall?"

It was obvious what her colleague would prefer, but Rai had come to Hogwarts with ulterior motives. She had every intention of seeing her son and passing along the "care package" the family had assembled for him.

"Great Hall, please," said Rai. "I enjoy eating with students." She smirked, putting as much mischief as she could into that statement without being threatening.

Severus groaned and Rai chuckled at his sour expression. "As you wish," he grumbled, inviting her to the door with a quick sweep of his arm.

As they walked through the dungeon halls, Rai admired the way Severus's robes billowed behind him. It was a singularly dramatic effect that no doubt frightened the first years. For the first time in years, Rai reconsidered wearing the occasional robes. She could never get an effect like that out of her sari. Of course, she mused, the billowing effect would probably make her look rather silly.

They arrived in the Great Hall before the bulk of the student body. Severus guided her up to what was obviously the teacher's table, pulling out a seat for her before sitting down to her right. The room

itself was the same ugly thing that she remembered from her long-ago visit as a little girl, but she found the ceiling to be singularly enchanting. The soft twilight gave the Hall an air of age and mystery that was quite appealing.

"Pretty," she said before turning to smile at Severus. He looked as though smiling in front of the children would probably kill him, and settled for a grimace that Rai took as agreement.

"One of the few consolations of dining with the brats," he said, pouring them both glasses of mead. A quick glance at the student tables confirmed that the teachers were the only ones with bottles. Rai couldn't help thinking that the mead would make an excellent target for student pranks. She surreptitiously sniffed her goblet before taking a sip.

She met Severus's amused gaze over the rim of her cup and raised an eyebrow. She wouldn't apologize for being careful. Though on second thought, she probably should explain so he wouldn't be offended. What followed was a spirited discussion about incorrigible youth and the precautions necessary to keep one's self from becoming a target.

Rai was so engaged in the conversation that she forgot to keep watch for her son, and was thus taken aback when she turned to face the student body and found Brie standing across the table.

"Mother," he greeted as soon as she met his eyes. He gave her a bow, supremely mocking and not at all as respectful as it probably appeared to his classmates. Rai narrowed her eyes.

"Hi Gabby," she said, quickly widening her eyes and stretching her smile as big as she could make it. She raised her shoulders slightly, clasping her hands to her bosom. Leaning forward ever so slightly, she tilted her head and let out a breathy giggle.

Brie's face turned to stone and two spots of color stood out high on his cheeks. She could almost hear his teeth grinding. She held her position for a moment longer, just to make Brie squirm, then sat back and let the unnatural expression melt off her face. Smirking, she crossed her arms over her chest and raised an eyebrow, inviting her son to do his worst.

For a moment it looked as though he was going to make a scene, but he deflated after a brief staring contest. He looked old and tired, and suddenly Rai wasn't interested in games anymore. She frowned in concern and leaned forward, motioning for him to come closer. He complied, shuffling his feet as though he were too tired to bother lifting them up to walk.

"(You look awful,)" she said in Hindi, inspecting him for further signs of fatigue and illness. She didn't like what she saw. "(When was the last time you slept, baby?)"

"(I got an hour or so last night,)" he replied in the same language, words lacking his usual crisp inflection. "(Bad dreams. I was hoping Aunt Geni might've given you something to pass along.)"

Rai had wondered what was in the care package. Apparently here was her answer. She held up a stalling finger as she quested in her satchel for the box. A glance at Severus showed that he was studiously ignoring them, which meant that he was probably paying very close attention indeed.

"(Here.)" She held out the wooden box, but refused to let go when he reached out to take it. "(I'm not sure what's in it, but if it isn't what you need, I want you to fire call me right away. I mean it,)" she added when he looked as though he wanted to brush off her concern. "(Right away. In fact, I want you to contact me within the week with an update on your health.)"

"(Yes ma'am,)" he muttered. She let him have the box.

"(Alright. Shoo. I love you, Reuben.)"

It was a sign of how tired he was that the name made him smile like he had back when he was six-years-old. She smiled back and made a shooing motion with her hands. The bow he gave her this time was only a little bit mocking.

Neville was as surprised as anyone to find Sarai mal Théa dining with Professor Snape in the Great Hall. Although other professors occasionally had guests visit them at school, it was unheard of for Snape to have company. The Gryffindors were abuzz with gossip about the strange woman. Neville had already been treated to three

theories of romantic entanglement, five of blackmail, and four suggesting Dark Purposes.

Neville kept his own fairly tame guess, that Ms. Rai's visit had something to do with brewing potions, to himself. It was funny hearing his classmates speculate.

"What was that all about?" Hermione inquired as Gabriel rejoined them carrying a wooden box under his arm. "Why is Ms. Rai here?"

"Je ne sais pas," said Gabriel. He muttered something else in French as he opened his book bag and shoved in the box.

"She's your mother! Surely she told you something," said Hermione. Neville wondered when she had decided that it was safe to be bossy to Gabriel. Personally he thought that her efforts were wasted on the French boy, but as long as she didn't get hurt, it wasn't his business. Besides, if she was being bossy to Gabriel, it meant she wasn't being bossy to Neville.

"She's my mother," Gabriel agreed, seeming to ignore the second half of Hermione's statement in favor of filling his plate.

Hermione huffed and Neville hid a smile behind his goblet of pumpkin juice. It was nice to see bossy-Hermione get brushed off for once. He loved her to death, but her alpha-female act could get a little tiresome.

When Ms. Rai and Professor Snape looked like they were getting ready to leave, Neville made his excuses and left the table. The seed of an idea had taken root in his brain, and it seemed like a fairly safe way of gauging the relative dangers of his Polyjuice Plot.

He hurried around through a back hallway, running toward the hall that led from the Great Hall to the dungeon. If he was lucky, he would be able to catch Ms. Rai before she made it to Professor Snape's office.

Luck was with him and he rounded the corner as the Professor held the hall door open for Ms. Rai. Neville took a moment to catch his breath before straightening his spine and clasping his hands behind his back. He waited politely until the two adults stopped in front of

him. It was all he could do not to flinch at the scowl on Professor Snape's face.

"Ms. Rai," he greeted, giving her the courteous half-bow of a young wizard to an older witch. "I am sorry to interrupt your evening, but I was wondering if I could beg a word in private."

Ms. Rai glanced over at the Professor, who shrugged despite his scowl. "The boy knows his way to my office. I will wait for you there."

"Thank you Severus," said Ms. Rai, smiling warmly. Her hand rested on the Professor's elbow for a moment, and a look passed between them that Neville had no interest in interpreting.

Professor Snape brushed past him, and it was all Neville could do not to sigh in relief. Ms. Rai smiled at him and held out her open hands in question.

"There's an empty classroom nearby, ma'am, if you would accompany me."

"Of course." She followed him in silence and waited for him to open the door and offer her a chair. He wished he'd learned the spell for summoning tea, but Uncle Algie insisted that young wizards shouldn't play hostess. Luckily they had just finished dinner, so Ms. Rai probably would've turned down the offer anyways.

"Ms. Rai," he said, then bit his lip, trying to think of the correct wording to begin a politically incorrect conversation.

"Be frank, Mr. Longbottom," she said, smiling encouragingly. "Augusta is famous for frankness, and it is one of her most endearing qualities. Don't be afraid to follow your Gran's example."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, feeling slightly less uncomfortable. "It's about Gabriel. He's been really sick. I've been woken up the last few nights by his episodes, and I'm concerned about him."

"Have you talked to him about it?" Ms. Rai didn't look surprised by the information, which Neville hoped was a good sign.

"No, ma'am. He gets uncomfortable when he thinks he looks weak, and I don't want to strain our...friendship." He said the last part

hesitantly, unsure if he wanted to claim the more intimate relationship. It seemed wrong to have this conversation if he was only an acquaintance, though, so friendship was probably the safer word.

"I see," she said. Her wry expression made it clear to Neville that Gabriel's obsession with appearing strong was not limited to when he was in public. "Can you describe these... episodes? My son only mentioned that he hasn't been sleeping."

Neville did his best to explain the symptoms of Gabriel's strange disease. The look of concern on Ms. Rai's face told him clearly that she was listening to him and that he was in her good graces. Should he risk telling her the rest of it? As quickly as the thought occurred to him, he dismissed considerations of risk. He was a Gryffindor for Merlin's sake! Leave plotting to the Slytherins. He plowed on, regardless of potential consequences.

"One night I got out of bed to see if he was alright," Neville continued, voice shaking slightly despite his resolve. "He was throwing up and...his glamours broke. I went back to bed before he could see me, but I got a good look at his back, chest, and face. Ms. Rai, I know it isn't any of my business, but who is Gabriel? I can't believe a mal Théa would do that to their child."

Ms. Rai looked sick at his not-so-subtle accusation. "Of course we wouldn't," she snapped, face drawn. "Look, Mr. Longbottom. You're right. It isn't any of your business. Suffice to say that I removed Gabriel from a poor living situation and brought him into my family. You aren't the first person to get curious, and you won't be the last. I'll tell you what I tell everyone else – that the adoption is private, but legal. Gabriel's biological parents are dead. I did not kill them. I love him. End of story."

Severus looked up as Rai entered his office alone. She smiled, though there wasn't as much life in her eyes as there had been prior to dinner. Hogwarts was an emotional wringer, and somehow he wasn't surprised that she had gotten caught in the drain. Despite his curiosity, he knew better than to ask what had happened. Better that they conclude their business like colleagues. They weren't friends, and Severus wasn't sure he wanted to change that. Rai seemed an uncomfortable sort of person to be friends with – rather like befriending a kneazle or a poltergeist.

"May I offer you tea?" he inquired as Rai sat down across from him. While he'd been waiting for her to arrive, he had transfigured the chair into something more comfortable than he usually offered to students.

"Thank you," she said, "but I'd rather just get down to business. My cousin has finished the translation and I am authorized to negotiate the fee." She reached into her satchel and pulled out a small tome that Severus immediately recognized as Salazar's Journal. She handed it over to him without a word.

Severus wondered how she had been authorized to negotiate a fee if she'd drugged her brother in order to come to Hogwarts. Which part was she lying about? The thought made him wary.

"Authorized by whom?" he prompted, not bothering to disguise his distrust.

"My cousin," she said, waving her hand dismissively. Severus grimaced, but recognized a losing battle when he saw one. She claimed to be authorized and she obviously had the translation in her possession – that made it her problem if someone later questioned the negotiations.

"Very well," he said, folding his hands on the desk. He did his best to hide his nerves. Although he had been trained in the protocols surrounding information brokering during his years in school, this was the first time he had actually bargained in such a way. The mal Théas had made a career of it for centuries. He waited for Rai to make the first move.

"I, Sarai mal Théa, do enter into this negotiation of my own free will. I swear upon my True Name that the terms agreed upon will be followed honorably by my self and my Family."

Severus had never heard someone swear on their True Name as part of a verbal contract. He'd heard people invoke their Names, offer their Word, and even swear on their Family Honor, but never as part of a contract. It made sense, though, when he thought about it. This wasn't the sort of thing that merited an unbreakable oath. He decided to follow her lead.

"I, Severus Snape, do enter into this negotiation of my own free will. I swear upon my True Name that the terms agreed upon will be followed honorably by my self and my," he paused. His family wasn't part of this contract, but Dumbledore would want to be included. "Allies."

Rai smiled as she pulled out three cloth bound notebooks. "I lay before you the subjects of our negotiations. A verbatim manuscript in the original language," she held her hand over the book on his far left, "an unedited translation," was the middle book, "and an edited translation with annotations regarding removed passages," was the book on his right. He fixated on the unedited translation. He wondered why an edited translation had even been created, other than for use as a way to drive up the price of the other manuscripts.

"No other copies or translations were made. Any of these books not spoken for during negotiations will be burned."

Severus nodded slowly. If it were true, then this negotiation would be a lot more honest than he'd expected. Although Rai's wording allowed some notes to exist, the copied original-language manuscript had just become potentially valuable.

"We shall begin with the fee for the translation. Would you care to begin?"

He most certainly did not care to, of course. His Slytherin side recognized the ploy as a way to gauge how much he valued the text and the mal Théa's services. If his offer was too high, they would milk him for every penny. If his offer was too low, any further negotiations would be a mere formality, and all three manuscripts would be burned.

Severus considered his options, and Rai sat back to let him think. He eyed the three books speculatively. He had guessed the purpose of the book on the right. It would be cheaper, and probably well edited. The middle book was, of course, the prize. He honestly might not be able to afford it with Dumbledore's budget. Why offer the non-translated copy, though? He had no use for it. The answer came to him immediately, and he offered Rai a true smile. How utterly Slytherin of her.

"I offer the mal Théa 'Cousin' the copy of the text for his or her private collection. Without knowing the time and effort that went into the translation, I can only hope that this will not seem an insulting offer."

Rai's smile clearly showed that he was following the script exactly as he should. "I accept on behalf of my Cousin, and I assure you that this is an adequate fee. The book, I understand, is quite valuable."

And that, Severus knew, was meant to start driving up the price. She would keep dropping hints about value and rare information as the bargaining got heated. The more he wanted the book, the more likely it would be for the negotiation to go in her favor.

Rai took the non-translated copy off the table and slipped it into her satchel to signify that it had been accepted in the place of a fee. It was nonrefundable. The work had been done, after all, even if the negotiations fell through and the other two books were burned. Still, having offered her the copy, the translations were suddenly infinitely less valuable to her. The risk of losing out completely was minimal, especially since he now had more gold to devote to negotiating for the actual translation. Not to mention that he now had a slight advantage – having offered non-monetary compensation for the service, she now had no idea how much he actually valued the translations and how much gold he was ready to spend.

With matching sly grins, Severus and Rai began the haggling in earnest.

"How did your meeting go?" Albus asked as Severus joined him in his office. He gestured for the younger man to sit.

"Well enough," said Severus, easing into the offered chair with an exhausted sigh. "Rai seemed to enjoy spending time around Hogwarts, and she came to the table prepared to bargain fairly."

Albus smiled in relief. He'd heard enough rumors about the mal Théa family to take Severus's caution about them to heart. To hear that things had gone 'well enough' was as much as he had dared to hope for. Hopefully the text would prove as valuable as they'd been led to believe.

"Tell me about it," said Albus, summoning a pot of tea and two china cups. He poured the tea as Severus began his story.

"It was much as I remember it from school. We began with an oath and Rai produced the text and the items to be bargained for. I agreed to let her keep a copy as the translation fee."

Albus frowned in disapproval, but didn't interrupt the story. He was unhappy that valuable information had been left with potential enemies, but there was nothing he could do about it now. Severus would not respond well to a chastising.

"Two volumes remained: a completely translated copy and an edited, annotated copy. Upon close examination and after spirited bargaining, I purchased the second book."

A disappointed little sigh escaped before Albus could stifle it. Severus glared at him, pausing to sip his tea. Albus refrained from questioning Severus's judgment outright, though he made it clear in his expression that he wanted further explanation.

"The second book was well organized – better than the first – separated into thematic chapters and made easy to read. The Parseltongue spells were edited out, though very brief descriptions of the effects remain. A few other pieces of information, including what appear to be references to the Chamber of Secrets, were removed but summarized. All in all, very little information of practical value was missing from the edited copy."

Albus disagreed about the possible value of information regarding the Chamber of Secrets, but decided not to voice his concern. While he remembered the last time the Chamber had been opened, the fact of the matter was that they probably wouldn't have been able to do anything with the references. And Severus was right. It sounded as though very little practical information had been removed.

"And how much did this text cost, my boy?"

"Not so very high a price," demurred Severus, looking entirely too innocent. Almost coy, thought the Headmaster. He added a few galleons to his first estimation.

"How much?" Albus repeated.

"926 galleons, 8 sickles, 2 knuts."

Albus wasn't sure whether to be outraged by the price or amused by the implication that Severus and Ms. mal Théa had been squabbling over knuts.

"That's almost your entire budget," he said, forcing his eyes to sparkle and his voice to sound merry. "How on earth did you arrive at such a sum?"

"Rai is quite persuasive," said Severus, and left it at that.

Neville sat in the alcove, rolling the corked vial around in his fingers and wondering what to do. His Gryffindor nature was at war with itself on the matter, and he could hardly turn to his friends for advice. For the first time, Neville was on his own with a problem.

This morning Gabriel had forgotten his hair brush on the bathroom counter and, having learned his lesson about missed opportunities years ago, Neville had pulled a hair free and added it to his single dose of Polyjuice.

Now he faced a moral dilemma. On the one hand, his Gryffindor curiosity and thirst for truth demanded that he quaff the potion and discover who Gabriel really was. On the other hand, his Gryffindor values and sense of justice demanded that he flush the potion and respect his friend's privacy.

He sighed and tipped his head back to rest against the stone, dropping his hands to his sides and letting the vial of potion rest against the window ledge. What to do?

"Neville!"

Neville spun around, hands out at his sides, body hiding the potion vial still on the window sill. It was Ginny, arms full of books and making a beeline straight for, Neville blushed to think it, her boyfriend.

"Hi Ginny," he said, doing his best to sound calm and cheerful. Her eyes immediately narrowed suspiciously and he gulped.

"What are you hiding?" she asked peering up at him. Neville looked away quickly, trying to think of an excuse.

"Er," he said, stalling. "I'm, uh, not hiding anything." Smooth. Real smooth. He grimaced.

Suddenly Ginny's face broke into a bright smile. "It's about Wednesday, isn't it," she said, wiggling her eyebrows. He nodded quickly, eager to take the out that she had so kindly provided.

"Yeah. Um, forget about it, okay?"

"Sure," she said, still smiling brightly. He felt his heart turn over, thudding noisily in his chest. She was the prettiest witch he had ever met. "Here, you can carry my books," she announced, thrusting her books into his arms. "We're meeting Hermione in the Library to study before dinner."

Neville spared one last terrified glance at the Polyjuice potion glinting on the window sill. Then he refocused on Ginny. It was probably better this way. Now he wouldn't be tempted to use it.

Melissande stalked through the hall, not quite able to hide her frustration. She'd been here for five whole months and she was dying of boredom. It had taken all of Daddy's considerable political clout to get Madame Maxime to agree to send her on exchange, and they would probably lose everything if she screwed up this time. Meli was even willing to recognize that she needed this break from her normal environment. This was her chance to start fresh, where no one but Gabriel knew about her past – and he didn't care enough about her to spread gossip.

But she was so bored! It was hard to be nice all the time. Smiling and chattering and forgiving slights were all actions that were very difficult for a girl who bred rats for the sole purpose of torturing them.

As she swept through one of the second floor corridors, the sun caught a glass object in the window and nearly blinded her. Biting back a scathing curse, she walked over with every intention of smashing the offending object into a thousand pieces. She stopped when she saw it held a sparkling golden liquid.

Curious, she sniffed at it, distracted from her brewing tantrum. Her eyes watered at the overpowering smell of cinnamon. Wrinkling her nose, she went back to inspecting it for clues. It looked... interesting, to say the least. Meli was no potions expert, but she figured it was safe to assume that it wasn't deadly. It had been left in a school corridor, after all.

She came to a decision quickly. She'd finally be able to let loose and have a little fun! She grinned, pocketing the potion. There was a bounce in her step as she headed deeper into the school.

Chapter 30: Hiding Harry Potter

Brie sat cross legged on his bed and pulled out the box from Mama. It was about the size of a text book, but deeper. He sent out a silent prayer that Aunt Geni had been able to find a solution to his current dilemma, because he was going on two weeks without a good night's rest. Much longer and he was liable to snap and accidentally kill someone.

Taking a deep breath, he flipped the latch and lifted the lid. On the left was a shrunken package labeled 'love, Cossette.' Brie pulled it out and set it aside to resize later. Usually that package, full of Cossette's infamous handmade chocolates, would be the prize. Today chocolate was the last thing on his mind. On the right there was another shrunken package labeled 'love, Mama.' Brie didn't even want to know what his mother had added to the package. He very carefully took it out and set it at the foot of his bed. It must not be too volatile, but better safe than sorry.

Sandwiched in the middle were three glass vials and a letter from Aunt Geni. Brie sighed in relief and tore open the letter.

My Dearest Nephew,

I knew this day would come eventually. The Killing Curse is too strong a magic to not leave something of itself behind. While I'd hoped that it would not manifest itself so strongly, I cannot say that I am surprised.

Brie was surprised by her bluntness. Even packages like this were occasionally subject to perusal by persons outside the family! Aunt Geni was usually quite good about euphemism and talking around a subject. She must have either been in a dreadful hurry or considered the contents of the vials too dangerous not to explain clearly.

Inside are three vials labeled ekam, dve, trini. On Thursday night you will drink ekam and dve before going to bed. You will wake up when your friend starts his search. Immediately take trini followed by a Dreamless Sleep, preferably one made by Rai or Ami.

Prior to ingesting ekam, meditate for at least thirty minutes. Gather yourself behind the strongest, smallest Occlumency barrier you can manage. Ekam will feel a bit like putting your head in a vice. Allow it

to constrict and bind you behind your shield. If you fight, it will be unnecessarily painful.

This is, unfortunately, only a temporary solution to buy you time. With your luck I will need to send you another batch next week. Inform me as soon as your barriers have relaxed to the point that you can perform Leglimancy again.

Love,

Genevieve mal Théa

Brie frowned, wary of his aunt's advice. To allow himself to be bound behind Occlumency barriers would greatly restrict his freedom of thought. She seemed to be implying that he would remain bound for upwards of a week. Was escaping night pains worth binding himself? He rubbed his hidden scar thoughtfully.

Yes, he decided. If this was the best solution that Aunt Geni could come up with, then it was the best solution that would be found. He needed to keep his thoughts from Voldemort. If the Dark Lord managed to break through his barrier – which he was increasingly close to achieving – then the whole game was up. His identity would be revealed, Shay's work would be undone, and Brie would be forced to confront the Dark Lord before he was sure he could win.

He set the three vials on his headboard and burned the letter. Changing quickly into his pajamas, he began meditating. It was only an hour after dinner, but turning in early tonight seemed like an excellent choice.

Lord Voldemort was not pleased. Ever since that Halloween fifteen years ago he had met nothing but failure after failure. Not that he would admit this to anyone else, of course. Failure was for the weak. Honestly, though, he felt he was going a little mad from all this failure.

First had been his failure to secure an adequate vessel for his spirit when his body was destroyed. Then his servants had failed to seek him out, leaving him to fend for himself in the wilderness. They had no faith, they failed to be properly inspired by his power. Quirrel had failed to win the Stone. And of course, the greatest failure of all – no one knew where to find Harry Bloody Potter.

At least Barty had managed to make his way back. Without Barty, Voldemort would likely still be bodiless specter. The resurrection, at least, had been successful. He'd had to make due with the blood of a lesser enemy, but old Alastor Moody had caused him enough trouble over the years that his blood added some spice to the ritual.

One success, however, wasn't enough to improve Voldemort's frame of mind. His followers had come flocking back, feckless idiots, but their raids thus far had been child's play. They weren't hitting targets of any real importance, and the only thing that was really being accomplished was that they were driving the population into a state of renewed terror. Fun, yes. Productive, only a little.

What Voldemort needed now was a coup; a victory that would prove once and for all that he was the most powerful wizard in Britain. Once he had Britain he could move forward, consolidate power, and destroy those who threatened the purity and continuity of Wizardkind. What would really make Voldemort feel better was Harry Bloody Potter's head on a silver platter.

A knock on his door startled him from his introspection. He frowned, hissing under his breath. Barty was the only one who would dare to disturb him uninvited. Voldemort hoped that it was good news. He wasn't particularly confident of his ability to deal calmly with yet another failure right now.

He flicked his wand at the door, not bothering to get out of his chair. It opened to reveal Barty, as expected, accompanied by an unmasked woman that he didn't recognize. She was dressed in pristine white robes, a sharp contrast to the dark, dingy interior of the Riddle house. He felt a surge of jealousy that he couldn't quite control. He didn't even know her, but he coveted what she represented to him – cleanliness, wealth, refinement, Traditionalist society... He felt vaguely embarrassed by their surroundings. Lord Voldemort deserved to be living in a Manor House with servants and clean windows and new furniture, not this hovel.

Barty bowed as soon as the door opened, silently waiting for acknowledgment. The woman swept an elegant curtsy, head bowed. She followed Barty's lead, remaining bent as Voldemort considered them.

"Rise," he said, mollified by their respectful deference.

"Master," said Barty, bowing lower before straightening. "I present to you Madame Lillith Rousseau. She has some news I thought you should hear."

"Come in Madame," he said, savoring the uneasy look that flitted across her face as she took a few steps into the room. "Please, sit down." He wordlessly conjured a chair a few paces away from his own. "Barty, you are dismissed."

"Merci milord," she said, alighting on the edge of the chair like an easily startled bird.

There was a second of strained silence as Voldemort leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. Rousseau seemed disinclined to speak unless spoken to, which Voldemort thought was an admirable quality in both women and children.

"To what do I owe this," he hissed, "pleasure, Madame Rousseau?"

She shifted on her chair, head bowed, wisely not trying to meet his eyes. After the uncomfortable jealousy he had felt upon seeing her, he was quite enjoying her discomfort.

"Milord, I first apologize for my English," she said, voice heavily accented. "I am unpracticed in this language."

"Go on," he waved his hand dismissively. If he couldn't understand her words, he would just take the information directly from her mind.

"Merci. Eh, thank you. Milord, I understand that you are," she paused, "allying yourself to General mal Théa, oui?"

Voldemort frowned. "No. General mal Théa is my supporter. He has offered me his services." He didn't like the woman's implication that Akshay was his equal. While the man wasn't exactly a servant, he was certainly at Voldemort's service.

"Pardon," she said quickly. "My English," she added, obviously trying to excuse her slip. He let his mind brush over her surface thoughts, looking for duplicity. He found none. If he wanted a closer

look, he would need to make eye contact. For now, he would let her continue.

"Milord, the General has been tightening his hold over France. His presence is felt further North. He is an ill wind, and it is whispered that he moves his army to the Chanel."

How interesting. Akshay hadn't mentioned moving North. While he would never admit it out loud, Voldemort was rather intimidated by the possibility of facing off against the General's mercenaries. His own Death Eaters were good enough in a raid against terrified civilians, but an army? He needed more time to prepare for that eventuality.

Rousseau was still talking. "The General has held sway in France too long, Milord." She looked up for the first time and Voldemort was taken in by the consuming hatred in her eyes. She glowed with the power of her emotion, and he was mesmerized. Only Bellatrix had ever looked so beautifully mad with hatred.

"You don't say," he murmured, leaning forward. This was no meek Traditionalist wife, whatever persona she chose to wear. He wanted her to belong to him. "Tell me more."

"He has sent his son-in-law to Hogwarts. His Archangel," her voice dripped with venom.

Voldemort already knew this, of course. Although he'd never met the boy, he'd heard nothing but good things. The boy had a bright future. He'd dropped hints to Akshay that he wanted the boy brought to a meeting, but thus far he had been politely ignored.

"He claims the Archangel is his nephew, but the boy hides his True Face."

Interesting, of course, but not exactly world-changing news. Voldemort was far more interested in the woman's hatred. He stood and walked over, tongue flicking out to taste the emotions in the air. She followed his progress through her lowered lashes. She looked... interested. He would have fun tonight.

Meli was stalking her prey. She'd set her sights on a particularly obnoxious Gryffindor third year. He'd just gotten out of Potions and

was on his way out of the dungeons. His classmates had already left him behind, apparently finding him about as appealing as Meli. It made him a good target.

"Diffindo," she whispered, pointing her wand at the boy's head. "Accio hair," she said immediately, summoning the lock of hair she had just cut. Wrapping it around her forefinger, she hurried to catch up with her prey.

"Creevey!" she called, twitching her wrapped finger. He stopped and turned to look at her.

"Hi," he said, waiting for her to catch up. He smiled at her. "You're Meli Rousseau, right?"

"Melisande," she corrected, eyes narrowing slightly. She had no idea who had started the rumor that she liked to go by her nickname, but she swore to Merlin that she'd kill whoever it was but good.

"Sorry," he said, not sounding very sorry at all. "What do you need?"

"You left something in the Potions classroom," she said, curling her wrapped finger. Dennis blinked.

"Really? Oh. Thanks." He looked confused, and Meli narrowed her eyes. She wasn't as good at this spell as her mother. She turned on all of her considerable charm, smiling and ducking her head and glancing at him through her eyelashes. He still looked confused, but at least he now looked happy about it.

She held out the unknown golden potion, and he took it without looking. He was too busy smiling at her.

"It's no problem, really," she assured him, tossing her hair over her shoulder. "You probably shouldn't tell anyone you've gotten so careless, though." She twitched her finger, hard. His eyes crossed. Oops. She smiled again, then turned to leave.

"Bye," he called after her, sounding almost drunk.

She ducked around a corner, then doubled back to follow him out of the dungeon. Would he take the potion? She was pretty sure she had embedded the thought successfully. Mother would be proud. It

would be years before she was good enough with the spell to get the same effects on an adult or a strong-minded individual, but for now a successful casting was one more step toward being able to live with her husband.

Dennis was halfway to the Great Hall for dinner before realizing he held a potion in his hand. Where had that come from? He vaguely remembered someone giving it to him earlier in the day, but couldn't remember when or where. Maybe after Potions class? It had been before he'd gone back to the common room to study, he was sure about that. He was also pretty sure that he was supposed to drink it before dinner. Madame Pomfrey had probably sent it. He'd gone to her yesterday with a sore throat – maybe she'd decided his illness merited a second potion?

While he was considering the origin of the strange potion, he absently uncorked it. He didn't realize that he was drinking it until he began to feel a bit funny. It didn't taste like any potion he'd ever taken before. It was so spicy his eyes watered, and he coughed, wishing for a glass of water.

Abruptly the feeling passed, and he absently shook his head. He felt... odd. Different. For one thing, his underwear felt too tight. That was weird. And his head felt a bit heavy. Something tickled the back of his neck. He reached back to scratch at it, only to discover that his hair was now much longer than it should be. What kind of potion made your hair grow long and your underwear get too tight?

Dennis frowned. By now he was pretty sure he'd been tricked into taking the potion as a prank. Maybe it was one of those potions that made you look older? Curious, he veered off toward the closest bathroom. A mirror would be good right now.

He rounded the corner and nearly ran into Draco Malfoy. He backpeddled quickly, eyes darting around for an exit.

"Watch where y-bloody fuck," Malfoy swore.

Dennis almost jumped, but managed to straighten up like the Gryffindor he was. Something about his appearance had startled Malfoy, so maybe the potion did something other than age you a bit. Dennis was pretty sure that an older Dennis Creevey wouldn't surprise Malfoy into swearing like a Muggle.

"Excuse me," Dennis said. It wasn't hard to sound offended. He tugged at his robes, suddenly glad that he was tall for his age. His clothing was still too small at the moment, but not as embarrassing as it might have been.

Malfoy was staring at him like he was the most interesting thing on the planet. He absently pushed his newly lengthened hair out of his face, only to see Malfoy's eyes get even wider.

"You're alive," he murmured, staring at Dennis's forehead in fascination. "Where have you been? What happened to you?"

Dennis got the feeling that he should look in a mirror before saying anything revealing. He was also quite sure now that he wasn't looking like himself. What had that potion been?

"Who are you?" he asked, deciding that pretending ignorance was a good plan for now. He needed to find Dumbledore and fast.

"Sorry," Malfoy shook his head quickly and straightened up. He smiled, a strange and disturbing sight as far as Dennis was concerned. "Draco Malfoy, Slytherin prefect. I'm very pleased to meet you. Harry Potter, right?"

Dennis choked.

Chapter 31: Making History

Dennis was pretty sure there must be something wrong with his ears. He'd read about Harry Potter, the baby who had defeated the Dark Lord, then disappeared off the face of the earth. Everyone knew Potter was in hiding. Maybe...

He had always felt a little out of place at home, as though he were not where he really belonged. Maybe he was Harry Potter, disguised and placed with a Muggle family for safe keeping? Had the potion been given to him by Dumbledore, to reveal his true face to the world so he could step up and meet his destiny?

Dennis had always known he was meant for great things.

"Pleasure," he said, nodding slightly as his thoughts whirled around, topsy turvy in his head. "If you'll excuse me," he added, moving to step around Malfoy and continue to the bathroom. He really needed a mirror.

"Of course," said Malfoy, still looking like the kneazle that caught the pixie. "I'll walk with you. You've been missed, of course. You should have been in my class."

Dennis frowned. He hadn't thought of that. If he were Harry Potter, he should be 16, not 13. Would Dumbledore have altered his age to protect him? Maybe. He walked down the hall, trying not to let on how much it bothered him to have Malfoy trailing after like a hungry snake. He probably shouldn't go admire himself in front of a mirror with an audience like that.

"What happened to you, Potter? We all want to know. And whyever are you dressed that way?" The last was said with a sneer so powerful that Dennis could hear it hanging in the air like a foul cloud.

Instead of answering, he ducked into the bathroom and whispered a locking spell before Malfoy could follow. It wouldn't hold him for long, but if he was lucky, it would be long enough. He hurried to the mirror. His jaw dropped.

Facing him was a tough looking older boy. The first thing that grabbed him was the other boy's scars. There was the lightning bolt, looking strangely raw, red and recent. It was etched into what looked

to Dennis like a burn covering much of his forehead. The bottom of the bolt had been extended down across his nose and cheek, though that part was a different color. The burn and extension looked old, only slightly pink and puckered, so why did the lightning bolt look so new? That was the only scar baby Harry was said to have.

It probably meant that Dennis himself was not actually Harry Potter, and he felt suddenly grateful for the revelation. It seemed Potter was not a very comfortable person to be.

Beyond the scars, the boy in the mirror was handsome enough. He was pale, with green eyes and long, straight black hair. His shoulders were wide, making him look especially funny in Dennis's robes. Dennis bit his lip in thought. What spell made robes bigger? Colin had taught it to him after he'd had his last growth spurt. Ah, yes!

A quick spell later, and his underwear and other clothing fit just fine. It didn't look good, exactly, but at least it didn't look like he was squeezing into clothes three sizes too small.

"Potter? You okay in there?"

Malfoy. What was he going to do about Malfoy? And what was that potion? It wasn't some kind of self-revealer, he was pretty certain of that. Had someone invented a potion to make people look like Harry Potter? That didn't seem all that far fetched, actually. But why target him?

He threw open the bathroom door and tried to think of something sufficiently boy-hero to say.

"I need to talk to Dumbledore," he announced, barely managing not to sound as frightened as he felt.

"I can take you there," Malfoy said, sounding only a little disappointed. "Come on, he should be in the Great Hall."

Dennis knew that, of course, but decided that humoring Malfoy was the safest option. He wondered what Malfoy was thinking right now – as an evil Slytherin git, Malfoy should be one of Potter's enemies. So why this I'm-your-friend routine?

Dennis was bewildered, and followed Malfoy without protest. He really did need to talk to Dumbledore.

Brie massaged his temples as he waited for dinner to appear. Aunt Geni's concoctions had worked, but now he was finding it difficult to think clearly. His creativity especially was suffering. He wasn't thinking well on his feet, and it took him longer to process what was going on around him. It was very annoying, especially because he felt like an observer chained in the back of his own mind. He couldn't help wondering if it was actually worth it.

"Are you okay?" Hermione inquired from across the table. He ignored her concern in favor of continuing to chase his current thoughts. "Brie? What's wrong?"

"Ssssh," he told her, closing his eyes to block her out. He heard her grumble something to Ginny, but didn't waste any brain power trying to decipher what it was.

Geni's potions had taken his secrets and artificially hidden them while providing the intruder with meaningless surface thoughts that would lead him in the wrong direction. Brie wouldn't have thought of that as a solution to his problem, and still wasn't sure he was comfortable with it. Thinking clearly was just too important to him. He was fairly certain that he would rather die of sleep deprivation than live life with muddled, unclear thoughts.

His slow train of thought was derailed when a sudden uproar filled the hall.

Dumbledore very gently closed the translation of Salazar's notebook. It was... inspired. Many of the thoughts written by the founder were considered foundations of magical theory now, but had hardly been conceived at the time the journal had been written. To have made so many steps forward, and yet to be so mired in hatred and fear... It made Dumbledore sad.

The journal was exactly what he had hoped, though. Many of the potions and spells had either been lost to time or had never been shared with the public. A few, especially the ones with known counters, could be provided to the Dark Lord with much pomp and circumstance. Severus's place amongst the Death Eaters would be

cemented, and there would be no real additional risk to the Order or to the children. All he needed to do was slip the counterspells into the children's curriculum and no one would be hurt.

This war was already too costly. Too many good witches and wizards had fallen, with no hope in sight. What he really needed was the boy-who-disappeared, a child spoken of in prophecy and whispers. He'd been watching the progress of the Longbottom boy. The boy had made great strides forward, and would certainly be liked by the Traditionalists who supported Dumbledore, but he lacked a certain... charisma that would make him a great leader.

With a sigh, Dumbledore stood. It was dinner time, and he had a duty to make an appearance. Usually he enjoyed dinners in the Great Hall. He liked to be surrounded by happiness and the fleeting joy of childhood. Lately, however, dinners had grown a bit too quiet. No one was free from the dark shadow cast by Voldemort's movements throughout Britain.

He only hoped that tonight, the laughter would drown out the silence.

Draco's mind was churning; a million possibilities were considered and discarded as he walked next to the boy with the lightning bolt scar. The possibility that this really was Harry Potter, magically turned up in the heart of Hogwarts after all these years, seemed too absurd to be the truth – and too absurd not to be. Where had he been? Why was he here now? What was his purpose?

Thus far Potter had been annoyingly quiet on all subjects. He'd seemed really nervous at first, maybe even scared? Draco's pride swelled at the thought that even Harry Potter knew to be wary of Draco Malfoy.

No matter why he was here or what would happen next, Draco couldn't wait to walk into the Great Hall with Harry Potter by his side. If he continued to play his cards right, and if Potter wasn't already too indoctrinated, there was even a possibility that he could be swayed...

There wasn't much hope, of course, but Draco liked imagining the best possible outcomes even as he planned for the worst case scenarios. This worst case, of course, involved Harry Potter being an indoctrinated idiot who required someone to put him out of his

misery. With enough skill, Draco hoped to maneuver into position to be the one with the quick spell to end it. He knew the best ways to escape Hogwarts, and from there to find the Dark Lord. The rewards would be immeasurable. He felt giddy at the thought.

He smiled as they approached the doors to the Great Hall. He was about to go down in history.

Levi wasn't entirely sure what was going on with Brie, but he was becoming increasingly worried about his cousin. There had been something very off about him at lunch. He'd been quiet on all the subjects that usually go a rise out of him, and when he had shown some inclination to speak, he'd been several thoughts behind the current conversation. It was odd, to say the least. After his earlier signs of sleep deprivation, Levi was starting to think that some sort of intervention was in order.

He watched his cousin, not bothering to disguise his concern. Beside him, he knew Anya was doing the same.

"Should we be doing something?" she asked, accent somewhat thicker than normal.

"No," he tightened his lips for a moment in thought, "nothing yet. Not unless something really big—"

"Oh look!" said Luna Lovegood from across the table, "isn't that Harry Potter?"

Chapter 32: Plausible Deniability

Levi's heart stopped for the breathless moment between hearing Luna's exclamation and whirling to face his cousin. He half expected to see the glimmers shattered and the tell-tale scar vivid and pulsing. Instead, Brie was looking strangely bewildered, as though he too were unable to process the sudden uproar of the student body.

"Oh my," said Anya, "Could that really be him?"

Levi followed her gaze to a pale young man in ill-fitting black robes. Levi absently catalogued the similarities and differences between this young man and his cousin. The facial features were nearly identical, though the change in skin tone was uncanny. This boy was shorter and slighter than Brie, though he still had an athlete's broad shoulders. His hair lacked any curl, though it was just as black and long as Brie's. The green eyes were the same, as were the scars – though Levi didn't remember his cousin's lightning bolt scar ever being that vivid and fresh. He wondered if that had to do with this boy being an imposter.

It was the scars that made Levi fairly certain that whatever this boy was, he was not just a look-alike pulled off the street to impersonate Harry Potter. No one outside the family knew that Potter was burned on the face or that his scar had been lengthened and changed. No one outside the family knew that Potter wore his hair long, or that his shoulders were broad for a teenager, or that he'd had his eyesight corrected long ago.

"Polyjuice," he muttered, eyes wide and palms sweaty. There was no other explanation. And if someone knew to Polyjuice his cousin, then someone knew who Harry Potter really was. And if that were the case... Levi was torn between running from the room to get help and staying to see what would happen next.

The imposter swept by them, clearly on his way to the Head Table. Only then did Levi notice that Draco Malfoy, of all people, was walking closely behind. Was the imposter somehow connected with Malfoy? Things kept looking worse and worse. He glanced back over to Brie, who still seemed dazed by what was happening. Levi would've given anything to know what was going through his cousin's head at that moment.

Brie stared at himself in confusion, unable to process such a completely unexpected turn of events. He looked... different. Shorter, smaller, paler. His stride was weak and not at all that of a trained warrior. He seemed more like a scared kid running for help than any kind of threat.

But how was he there? How was he walking up the Great Hall with Malfoy? How was the adoption ritual reversed like that? He could only assume that this was what he would have looked like had he not been granted asylum by the mal Théas. But how could someone know that? Not even he really knew how he might've looked.

It took a minute for him to clearly think of the fact that it couldn't possibly be him walking down the Hall, and that minute for comprehension frightened him. That shouldn't even take thought, let alone serious contemplation. He watched not-himself reach the Head Table and the trembling Dumbledore. Why was he surrendering himself to that old man? What an odd choice!

A few minutes later the Head Table was empty of teachers and the room was buzzing with excited chatter and speculation. Brie wondered where all the teachers went. Where had not-himself gone? He frowned down at his food, not even remembering when it had arrived.

Albus Dumbledore had seen many things in his life, and hoped to see many more. He often dreamed of seeing Harry Potter walk through the Hogwarts Great Hall. It took him by surprise, then, to see that young man actually hurry through the doors and up the aisle toward the Head Table. He tried to stand, but found himself instead pressing his hands to his chest, trying to contain his sudden rush of excitement, hope, awe, and terror.

"Headmaster! I need to speak with you," Harry said, coming to a halt before the table.

"My dearest boy," Dumbledore whispered, then coughed to clear his throat. "My dear Mr. Potter," and wasn't that name a treat! "I am at your service."

He rose, slowly, carefully, gripping the table tightly to support himself.

"Shall we adjourn to a more private location?"

"Thank you, sir," said Harry, sounding just like his father. Dumbledore wasn't entirely sure what to make of the strange extra scars on the boy's face. How had he gotten them? Was someone training him to be a warrior? Anything seemed possible at that moment.

They walked out of the room, Dumbledore hardly willing to take his eyes off of his newly discovered prize. This had to be the best day of his life. It might even beat out his defeat of Grindewald. Harry Potter, alive! And home of his own volition! He reached out carefully, somewhat afraid that to touch the boy would cause him to disappear; he seemed a bit flighty.

Harry jumped as Dumbledore touched him on the shoulder. He looked over with a strangely guilty expression. Was he feeling bad about disappearing? That would be nice – it would mean he was feeling some kind of connection or guilt. It would mean he was more likely to be ready to commit to the cause. That would be perfect. Dumbledore could feel everything coming together.

He could hear his professors following them, talking amongst themselves. He should probably send them back to the Great Hall to quell the rumors – not that they knew what the truth was yet, of course. He was pretty sure that Harry would be more comfortable in a one on one meeting. After all, he hadn't asked to speak to the entire Hogwarts staff...

They reached the Headmaster's office, and Dumbledore turned to face his professors, hand still resting on Harry's shoulder.

"My dear professors, I must ask you to go back to the Great Hall. As soon as I have news, you know that I will share it with you." Someone – probably Severus – snorted loudly. "For now, Mr. Potter and I shall converse privately."

"But Headmaster," began Minerva, stepping forward and looking far too prepared to battle for her right to be present at the meeting.

"You are needed by the students," Dumbledore interrupted. He fixed her with a steely look. Hopefully she would take that as a sign to back off – for the good of Wizarding kind.

"I'm not," said Sirius, who was looking at Harry with a hungry, haunted look in his eyes. Dumbledore was afraid of what would happen if he refused Sirius entrance, but more afraid of allowing the desperate man to interfere with the coming interview. They had no idea where Harry had been or how he would respond.

"There will be plenty of time for reunions later," said Dumbledore, smiling genially. Before anyone had a chance to protest, he steered Harry into the staircase and let the gargoyle jump shut behind them.

"Headmaster," Harry began, sounding nervous.

"Come, come, sit, sit," said Dumbledore, ushering Harry forward to sit in the visitor's chair. "Tea? Lemon drop?"

"No, thank you Headmaster. Sir –"

"Mr. Potter, I cannot begin to tell you how happy we are to have you back! Where have you been?"

"No, Headmaster, I'm not –"

"I understand if you don't want to talk about it, Mr. Potter. But it really is for the best so that we can best know how to proceed. Now that you're here, I'm sure you would like to start classes as soon as possible?" His hands were itching to grab the sorting hat and jam it on the boy's head without further delay.

"No!"

"But why not? Hogwarts, as I'm sure you are aware, is the premier wizarding school in Britain!"

"I'm not Potter," the boy blurted, red faced. "I'm Dennis Creevy. Someone... I think someone pranked me, sir. They gave me a potion, and now I look like this! I don't know what to do, sir!"

The silence stretched for an infinite moment. Not... Harry Potter? A prank? Dumbledore took a long, deep breath. For so much hope to be so suddenly killed, it was nearly unbearable. What kind of cruel prank was this?

"I see," he said slowly, feeling the weight of the world once again descend on his shoulders. "I see. Mr. Creevy, please tell me more about this," he paused, "prank."

"Well, sir, I drank a potion." Creevy leaned forward, obviously relieved to have an outlet for his story. "It was gold and it smelled, um, like cinnamon? And it was really spicy, worse than Pepper Up. I remember someone giving it to me and telling me to drink it, maybe after Potions? But I don't really remember who, or when, or anything."

"And you just drank this mysterious potion?" Dumbledore couldn't help feeling a little skeptical. Maybe it was because of the false hope of finding Harry, but he just couldn't believe that any of the students would be so stupid as to drink an unknown potion without consulting a qualified wizard or witch.

"Well, yes," Creevy admitted, looking sheepish. It looked odd on Harry's face, with the scar tissue pulling in a grotesque manner.

"I see. And do you happen to have any of the potion left?"

"No sir. I have the vial, though!" He fumbled about with his pockets for a moment before pulling out a small glass vial and setting it on the table.

"Thank you Mr. Creevy." Dumbledore looked at the empty vial, then looked up, catching the boy's eyes. His mind was completely unprotected, without even the rudimentary shields that most purebloods erected naturally.

The boy's mind was in turmoil. Everything was laced with fear and confusion. He didn't know what was happening or why. All he knew was what he'd said; someone had slipped him the potion and he had turned into the missing hero of the wizarding world. In another situation Dumbledore might have been amused by the boy's short-lived theory of actually being Harry Potter.

When he tried to push further, to unravel the rest of Creevy's day, he found a strange yellow string wrapped around the boy's thoughts. The string bound together some moments, and cut off access to others. All Dumbledore could really tell for sure was that Creevy was

right in guessing that he'd been given the potion after his Potions class.

Attempting to cut the string would probably require the boy's permission. It was wrapped strategically through his mind and any action to change its position would be easily detectable. Regretfully he pulled out without the answer he wanted. He could come back to it later, if need be. More important was figuring out what the potion was and what to tell the students.

And whether he could duplicate the effects.

The professors paraded back into the Great Hall without a word. The looks on their faces revealed nothing new. Hermione wasn't sure what to make of everything that had happened. As smart as she was, she just couldn't string everything together coherently. It was incredibly frustrating to say the least.

"Harry Potter," she muttered, looking around at her equally bewildered friends. "Harry Potter, here! Now! Why?"

"If it even was Potter," said Ginny, shrugging slightly. "How would we know? I mean, we know what his parents looked like, but so does everyone else. Someone might be able to fake it."

"Dumbledore would figure that out," said Ron. "Besides, did you see his scar?"

"All of them," said Hermione, grimacing slightly. "That was horrible. Did you see how burned his face was? It was like someone was..." she trailed off, unable to complete the horrible thought.

"Was trying to burn away his identifying scar?"

Hermione glanced over at Brie, and was reminded how sickly he'd seemed all week. Now he looked wan and ready to collapse. She felt a rush of concern despite her excitement.

"Yeah," said Ginny, not seeming to notice Brie's illness. "And that weird old scar across his nose? Who would do that?"

"I heard that something went wrong in the Muggle home he was put into," said Seamus, leaning over the table. "I read that they locked his uncle up for being a murdering pervert."

Next to her, Neville suddenly scrambled away from the table, face white as a sheet. He stuttered something that might have been 'gotta go,' then bolted awkwardly from the room as though a demon were chasing him.

"What on earth got into him?" asked Hermione, staring after him with some concern.

"Dunno," said Ginny. "I should probably go check on him." She glanced toward the professors sitting silently at the Head Table, obviously torn.

"I'll go," said Brie unexpectedly. He heaved himself away from the table, leaning heavily on his cane.

"Thanks," said Ginny. "I'll find you guys as soon as we hear news, okay?"

Brie nodded as he headed toward the exit. The next time Hermione glanced over, his little Ravenclaw cousin had manifested at his elbow and was walking with him. That was good – at least she wouldn't need to worry about him anymore. The mal Théas were good at taking care of their own.

A/N: Because people asked, I wanted to offer an explanation of the ease with which everyone recognized Harry Potter. It is an authorial rant, and you are free to ignore it.

First, I am operating under the assumption that pictures of James and Lily Potter are not difficult to come by. While in my story Harry is not identical to James, there is still a very strong resemblance. Someone who had seen a few pictures could see strong similarities if they had reason to make the connection. Remember that at different times during the school year, Sirius has compared Brie to both James and Lily; he simply hasn't had any reason at all to suspect that the resemblance might mean something.

Which leads to the scar. At the beginning of the story, I stressed that the Dursleys did what they could to alter the scar on Harry's face. I

pointed out that the scar could be seen if you looked for it, but wasn't immediately apparent. The difference between then and now is that, since Halloween, the Dark Lord has been actively using the connection to try to access Harry Potter's mind. While it only caused the scar to reopen once (see the chapter about the Halloween Feast), the constant attacks have inflamed the scar. Furthermore, the evening prior to this chapter, Brie had taken potions that allowed the Dark Lord access to parts of his mind. Instead of fighting Voldemort, he allowed him entrance, which I posit would cause the scar to become more inflamed as it was used to channel a greater portion of Voldemort's consciousness. Usually Brie fights to keep the connection small, causing less inflammation.

We all know how JKR has crafted this connection. In the end, this is my story and I am operating under altered rules of my design. This explanation is to let you know that I am conscious of the rules I have already crafted, and to let you know that I am making decisions based on the slightly altered mechanics of my alternate universe. Throughout this story I have made similar decisions.

I am always open to questions, and I do occasionally forget things – but please do not assume that the choices I make are purely for dramatic flair.

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